SE19 SEND Strategic and Operational Leads Meeting
Notes of meeting
Tuesday 7th July 2026

Attendance

Name	Role	Local Authority
Gavin Spiller	SEND Improvement Manager	Bracknell Forest Council
Sarah Speedie	Head of Education SEND	East Sussex
Pippa Damant	Assistant SEND Service Manager, Operations	Hampshire County Council
Jen Greensmith	SEN Area Team Manager	Hampshire County Council
Claire Campling	SEN Service Manager	Hampshire County Council
Siobhan Price	Assistant Director, School Inclusion	Kent County Council
Victoria Courtis	Head of SEND	Milton Keynes
Deborah Smit	Assistant Director, SEND & Inclusion	Oxfordshire County Council
Keran Currie	Head of Inclusion, Children, Families and Education	Portsmouth City Council
Sheelagh Sullivan	Regional SEND Lead	SESLIP
Sonia Dayal	Project Manager	SESLIP
Peter Gray	Cluster Models Lead	SESLIP
Chris Baird	Courageous Conversations and Targeted Support Lead	SESLIP
Emma Stone	Mainstream Inclusion Lead	SESLIP
Claire Woodcock	Improvement Consultant, SEND & Social Care	SESLIP
Daniel Beck	Head of Strategic SEND	Southampton City Council
Lara Jordan	Head of Service, Statutory SEND	Southampton City Council
Liz Bone	AD, SEND	Surrey County Council
Emma Ferrey	Service Lead for SEND	West Berkshire
Aaron Swain	SENAT Service Manager	West Sussex
David Griffiths	SEN Manager	Windsor and Maidenhead
Jamie Conran	Acting Service Director, SEND & Inclusion	Wokingham Borough Council

1. Welcome and introductions

- Jamie welcomed everyone to the meeting. Colleagues were asked to put their names and roles into the chat to support attendance monitoring.
- It was acknowledged that the last quarter had been extremely busy for colleagues with SEND Reform planning being delivered alongside inspection activity and local priority action work. Therefore, this meeting was framed as a solution-focused space to share ideas and support each other during a high-pressure end-of-term period.

2. SEND Reform Plans: Regional round up, pressure points, communication, impact of Local Government Reform for planning and implementation

- Deb shared the following questions in the chat and invited colleagues to discuss further:
  - *What are the biggest barriers to delivering your SEND Reform Plan over the next 12 months?*
  - *Which aspects of the reform programme feel most difficult to implement at pace?*

  - *Are there particular workforce, financial or sufficiency pressures that could impact delivery?*
  - *Where do you see the greatest risk of reform activity competing with business-as-usual demands?*
- consider the biggest barriers over the next 12 months, what feels most difficult to implement at pace, workforce concerns and the challenge of delivery alongside already complex statutory roles.
- Surrey raised how the Local Government Reform was a major pressure, as they are moving towards two unitary authorities, alongside expected Ofsted/CQC inspection activity and SEND Reform delivery.
- The lack of certainty that reform proposals had passed through Parliament, leaving authorities preparing for a new way of working without full legislative clarity was also raised as a concern.
- Workforce was identified as the most significant pressure point. Colleagues highlighted the lack of educational psychologists nationally, local recruitment challenges, the need to map workforce expansion by quarter and uncertainty about DfE monitoring if workforce and sufficiency targets cannot be delivered.
- ICB restructuring was identified as another risk as local authorities are still waiting to confirm key health partners for reform delivery.
- Inspection was a common theme: authorities are working within existing inspection frameworks while also developing SEND Reform Plans that may not align with those frameworks in the short term.
- Parent carer relationships, consultation and co-production was discussed and colleagues felt that meaningful co-production has been made difficult, increasing pressure on local teams and affecting trust.
- Schools were described as not yet consistently understanding the practical implications of the reforms, despite webinars and engagement sessions in some areas.
- Funding uncertainty was raised, including the carry-forward position for Experts at Hand grant, unknown arrangements for years two and three, national funding formula questions and quality assurance of funding distributed to mainstream settings.
- It was agreed that communication should be continued via email.
- Concerns were raised from a LA about parent carer communication, school understanding, maturity matrix expectations and an increase in EHCNA requests, including a reported 68% increase between February and March this year compared with 21% in the same period the previous year.
- Funding and quality assurance concerns, including how mainstream funding distribution and peer support/mentoring will work were raised.
- Colleagues raised the challenges of aligning SEND Reform Plans with priority action plans, transformation plans and other local system plans.
- A need was identified for a clearer, simple and consistent story for families, schools and partners that connects SEND Reform with related programmes such as Best Start in Life, Families First and family hubs.

Actions

- It was agreed that SEND Reform Plans will remain a regular agenda item.
- A request for examples of local communication materials and links from authorities will be made by Sonia and LA's are encouraged to share these including local offer links, emails, flyers, webinar materials and other communications products.
- It was agreed that communication should be continued via email.

3. Experts at Hand

- Jamie outlined Wokingham's developing Experts at Hand model. The imaged shared is attached to these notes. The model uses secondary schools as anchor points, links primary schools and relevant FE settings, and connects locality arrangements with family hubs.

- Wokingham use multi-agency inclusion clinics, including current bi-weekly clinics where education settings can bring emerging issues such as attendance, suspensions and wider concerns for multi-agency discussion. The proposed next step is locality-based mini-clinics with a multi-disciplinary team approach.
- The workforce element is the key area of innovation. Wokingham is exploring practitioner roles, for example educational psychology assistants under qualified supervision, linked to local university pathways to grow the future workforce over one to three years.
- Schools were reported to value visible modelling and practical support in settings, and to be less concerned about whether the practitioner is a fully qualified professional or assistant, provided that supervision and quality are in place.
- Wokingham is in the process of developing the concept of an Inclusion Academy or SEND and Inclusion Centre of Excellence, bringing together training, supervision and shared resources across educational psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and specialist teaching.
- The need for regional or sub-regional consistency was highlighted, especially for post-16 providers working with learners from multiple local authorities. Different Experts at Hand models could create complexity for FE colleges and providers.
- David confirmed similar questions from local FE colleges with multiple campuses and cross-authority footprints, including whether the lead should be the head office authority, individual campus authority or each local authority separately.
- Emma highlighted that both post-16 and early years feel underdeveloped in some Experts at Hand offers, and that funding is not sufficient to deliver a comprehensive 0 to 25 offer across schools, PVI settings and colleges.
- Sheelagh Sullivan advised that a mainstream community of practice will include an Experts at Hand emphasis or subgroup.
- A survey will be circulated to establish what local authorities have done so far on Experts at Hand. The survey outputs will help colleagues benchmark their local proposals, understand regional variation and support conversations with schools and partners
- Claire Woodcock will repeat the staff survey undertaken last year, with an additional Experts at Hand element, expected around September. The survey will have a short turnaround, likely over the summer, with analysis and feedback to follow.

Actions

- Colleagues were asked to prioritise completing the Experts at Hand survey.
- Claire Woodcock will repeat the staff survey undertaken last year, with an additional Experts at Hand element, expected around September. The survey will have a short turnaround, likely over the summer, with analysis and feedback to follow.
- Post-16 cross-boundary models should be considered further, as FE providers often work across multiple local authority footprints.

4. The Cluster model

- Peter Gray introduced the cluster model in the context of wider SEND and inclusion strategies: procurement, matching needs to services, increasing mainstream capacity and collective responsibility through clusters.
- Procurement and local specialist capacity were described as important but not sufficient on their own to control high needs spend, because demand for specialist provision continues to rise.
- Matching needs to services includes thresholds, banding, ordinarily available provision and the graduated approach, but these can become perceived as hurdles if schools see them mainly as routes to additional funding or alternative placements.
- Increasing mainstream capacity includes Experts at Hand and inclusion bases, but questions remain about workforce, role clarity, outcomes and whether sufficient disincentives for inclusion have been removed.
- The cluster model aims to build collective responsibility between local authorities and mainstream schools for meeting needs within an available budget.

- Core features include local groups of mainstream schools working with the local authority to deploy funding flexibly and equitably, including support for individual pupils, groups and schools, without depending solely on the EHCP route.
- Locality groupings were described as generally more practical than MAT-only groupings, because MATs may be geographically dispersed or contain diverse school groupings.
- Around 30 local authorities are currently engaged in, or actively pursuing, cluster models, with communities of practice developing across regions including SE19.
- Reported impacts include culture change, stronger partnership, positive SENCO engagement, peer moderation, peer challenge, and early signs of EHCP demand plateauing in some areas such as Southampton.
- Peter highlighted risks if culture does not change before statutory reforms, including increased demand, pressure on school budgets, high needs deficits, casework capacity pressure and increased statutory activity for support services.
- A discussion around the role of Ofsted and whether inspection accountability is yet strong or consistent enough to drive inclusion in schools took place, and Peter emphasised peer network accountability and SENCO professional accountability as important complements to hierarchical accountability.
- A question was raised regarding cluster size and Peter suggested that around 8 to 12 schools, ideally cross-phase where possible, is often a workable range, while recognising the need for pragmatism in rural areas and where schools are very small.
- Keran highlighted that the funding formula is as important as the grouping itself. Variables could include deprivation, SEN and EHCP numbers, and the formula needs to feel equitable.
- Peter noted that current systems are not perfectly equitable, because some schools put forward more children than others and parental demand also affects patterns.
- Sheelagh Sullivan strongly endorsed the cluster model as a route to culture change and budget control, while stressing that it is complex and requires active support.

Actions

- Colleagues interested in joining the Cluster model community of practice should contact Sheelagh Sullivan or Sonia Dayal.
- A cluster model community of practice meeting is taking place tomorrow, and colleagues were invited to identify if they wish to join and Sonia will share the Teams invitation.

5. Standing items

- David described the current term as one of the most difficult operational periods with rising tribunal numbers, increased EHC requests, late requests for school changes and specialist placements, and more escalations directly to directors or chief executives.
- The group recognised a wider pressure from media coverage and the risk of all local authorities being judged through the lens of national SEND concerns.
- Other LA's stated they were experiencing similar pressures, including complaints bypassing SEND services and going straight to the Chief Executive, with social media narratives reinforcing escalation as a route to action.
- Families were described as anxious about the reforms and increasingly seeking specialist placements for security. Schools were also described as sometimes lacking resilience or confidence to support decisions that children can remain in mainstream.
- Oxfordshire reported no major EHCNA spike yet, but a steady increase and significant pressure from phase transfer tribunals. A 25% increase in requests for specialist placement at Year 6 to Year 7 phase transfer was noted.
- Deborah highlighted the difficulty of defending mainstream at tribunal where schools state they cannot meet need and the local authority does not have a firm mainstream offer. This can lead to concessions by mutual consent, even for children who should be supported in mainstream under the reform direction.
- A discussion took place regarding the challenge of running the current statutory and legal framework in parallel with reform implementation, particularly where current systems and reform aims do not yet reinforce one another.

- The impact on staff wellbeing was raised as a concern, including repeated exposure to blame, inspection-related criticism, escalating complaints and AI-generated complaints that may cite incorrect or non-existent legal frameworks.
- It was agreed there is a need to set boundaries, support teams and recognise the emotional impact on the workforce.
- The potential for an additional regional quality assurance task group was listed on the agenda but was not discussed in detail due to time constraints. It was suggested that that remaining points could be picked up separately with Sheelagh and Deborah.

Legal training offer

- Sheelagh promoted the Bevan Brittan SEND legal training offer. It is flexible and can be used for individuals or whole teams.
- There are 16 sessions. The first set focuses on legal/process fundamentals and starts in September. The second set is broader and may attract a more mixed audience, including parent carers.
- The training is intended to support teams with the legal basis of SEND practice as it currently stands, including new staff.

Actions

- The SEND legal training details will be circulated with or shortly after the meeting notes. Colleagues should consider which staff would benefit from the fundamentals and wider sessions.
- Operational pressures, EHCNA demand, tribunal trends and staff wellbeing should remain standing items.

6. Regional RIIA Plans 2026-2027

- Chris Baird was invited to give update on the RIIA plan. Chris explained that the regional improvement plan for 2026-2027 was due to be considered by DCSs on Friday 10 July 2026.
- The plan is guided by the DfE grant. The regional offer includes pan-South East work and an increasing emphasis on subdivisions, groups of authorities and ICB clusters.
- Courageous Conversations will continue into the next year. Some local authorities may prefer autumn dates because of current pressures, and members were encouraged to contact David as soon as possible to get dates booked in diaries.
- 13 local authorities had used the offer for staff to visit other local authorities, with parent carer forum representatives also contributing valuable perspectives.
- The Targeted Support Programme will continue for support already arranged and through carry-forward funding for the remainder of the year, but the title/programme will end as the relevant grant ends.
- The Lean Academy and coaching offer are continuing while funding remains.
- Members were encouraged to talk to their DCSs if they value the support and want to influence how it may continue or develop.

Regional diagnostics / maturity matrix analysis

- Sheelagh explained that the region wants to carry out a collective analysis of SEND Reform maturity matrices/indexes to target support effectively and understand regional strengths and weaknesses.
- The analysis will not name individual authorities. It will produce a collective regional view.
- DCSs have agreed the approach and Public Alchemy has been engaged to undertake the analysis.
- Local authorities will be asked to send their maturity matrix/index so that the analysis can be completed.

SEND Reform SROs and governance

- Jamie queried if there is a list of Senior Responsible Officers for SEND Reform Plans. Sheelagh confirmed that this information has been requested from DCSs and will also be included in the email request to local authorities.
- It was also suggested that it would be helpful to understand different governance arrangements for overseeing SEND Reform Plan delivery across authorities.

- Sheelagh suggested governance information might be gathered through a future survey or added to another survey, such as the Experts at Hand survey.
- The group emphasised the value of sharing, learning and borrowing practice across SE19, especially where authorities are grappling with similar delivery challenges.

Actions

- Sheelagh and Sonia will request maturity matrices/indexes and SEND Reform Plan SRO details, and authorities will be encouraged to provide the requested information.
- Sheelagh and Sonia will consider how best to gather governance arrangements for delivery oversight.
- Members should feedback through DCSs if they value the targeted support, Courageous Conversations, Lean Academy or coaching offers.

7. Date of next joint meeting

- The next joint meeting is taking place on Friday 9 October 2026, in person and will include a partial joint agenda with Regional Educational Leads. This will take place at Broadway House, London. The following topics were suggested for the agenda for this meeting:
- SEND Reform should remain a focus because authorities will be further into implementation by then.
- The first quarterly SEND Reform submission/return may be a useful discussion topic, including what information has been required and what barriers authorities have experienced in delivering what they said they would deliver.
- Jamie thanked colleagues for attending and wished everyone well for the end of term and summer period.