

RECORD OF EXECUTIVE DECISION TAKEN BY AN EXECUTIVE MEMBER

This form **MUST** be used to record any decision taken by the Elected Mayor or an individual Executive Member (Portfolio Holder).

The form must be completed and passed to the Chief Officer responsible for Legal and Democratic Services no later than NOON on the second working day after the day on which the decision is taken. No action may be taken to implement the decision(s) recorded on this form until 7 working days have passed and the Chief Officer responsible for Legal and Democratic Services has confirmed the decision has not been called in.

1. Description of decision

- (1) That the award of the Department for Education's Experts at Hand and Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund grant funding to Bedford Borough Council, in the sum of £1,614,322 for the 2026/2027 financial year as outlined in the report prepared to accompany this decision, be approved.**
- (2) That authority be delegated to the Service Director for Education, SEND and School Infrastructure, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and the Council's Section 151 Officer, to allocate and distribute the funding in accordance with Bedford Borough's approved Local SEND Reform Plan and the Department for Education's grant conditions.**

2. Date of decision

5 August 2026

3. Reasons for decision

- (i) In March 2026, the Department for Education required all local areas to develop and submit a Local SEND Reform Plan setting out how they will implement the next phase of national SEND reform. Bedford Borough's Plan was submitted to the DfE on 19 June 2026.
- (ii) The Department for Education has confirmed Bedford Borough's Experts at Hand and Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund allocation for 2026/2027 as £1,614,322 to support delivery of the Experts at Hand model set out in the Plan.
- (iii) Bedford Borough enters this programme from a position of demonstrated improvement, having achieved a Grade 1 outcome at its November 2024 Local Area SEND inspection and EHCP timeliness performance of 95.45%, against a national average of 39.6%.
- (iv) Given the pace of implementation required under the grant conditions, delegated authority enables timely allocation of funding in accordance with the approved Local SEND Reform Plan, supporting effective mobilisation of the Experts at Hand model across schools, early years settings and further education providers.

4. Alternatives considered and rejected

Decline or defer acceptance of the grant. This is not recommended, as it would delay implementation of the Local SEND Reform Plan and risk the funding being reallocated nationally.

Accept the grant but require each individual allocation decision to be brought back for separate sign-off, rather than delegating authority. This is not recommended given the pace of implementation required and the administrative burden this would place on timely delivery.

5. How decision is to be funded

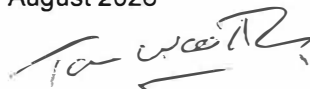
The decision relates to the acceptance of Department for Education Experts at Hand and Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund grant funding (£1,614,322 for 2026/2027). Under the grant conditions, at least 80% of funding must be spent on direct Experts at Hand delivery, no more than 10% on administration and no more than 10% on local authority transformation costs. No new Council funding or borrowing is required.

6. Conflicts of interest

Name of all Executive members who were consulted AND declared a conflict of interest.	Nature of interest	Did Standards Committee give a dispensation for that conflict of interest? (If yes, give details and date of dispensation)	Did the Chief Executive give a dispensation for that conflict of interest? (If yes, give details and the date of the dispensation).

The Mayor has been consulted on this decision

5 August 2026



Signed: 

Date: **5 August 2026**

Name of Decision Taker: **Cllr. Jane Walker**
Portfolio Holder for Valuing Families: Children's Services

This is a public document. A copy of it must be given to the Chief Officer responsible for Legal and Democratic Services as soon as it is completed.

Date decision published: **5 August 2026**.....

Date decision can be implemented if not called in: **14 August 2026**.....

(Decision to be made exempt from call in.....NO.....)

Bedford Borough Council – Report to Portfolio Holder for Valuing Families: Children’s Services

Date of Report: 5 August 2026

Report by: Service Director – Education, SEND & School Infrastructure (Chief Education Officer)

Subject: ACCEPTANCE OF DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION EXPERTS AT HAND GRANT FUNDING AND DELEGATION OF ALLOCATION AUTHORITY

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 To agree acceptance of grant funding offered by the Department for Education (DfE) through the Experts at Hand programme, and to agree delegated authority for its allocation and distribution in accordance with Bedford Borough Council's approved Local SEND Reform Plan and associated DfE grant conditions.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Portfolio Holder considers the report and, if satisfied, to:
- (1) Approve acceptance of the Department for Education’s Experts at Hand grant funding allocation for 2026/2027 of £1,614,322.
 - (2) Delegate authority to the Service Director for Education, SEND and School Infrastructure, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and the Council's Section 151 Officer, to allocate and distribute the funding in accordance with the approved Local SEND Reform Plan and Department for Education grant conditions.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 To enable timely acceptance of Experts at Hand grant funding and its allocation in support of Bedford Borough's Local SEND Reform Plan and the delivery of national SEND reform.

4. THE CURRENT POSITION

- 4.1 In March 2026, the Department for Education (DfE) required all local areas to develop a Local SEND Reform Plan setting out how they will implement the next phase of national SEND reform. Bedford Borough's Plan was submitted to the DfE on 19 June 2026.
- 4.2 Bedford Borough enters this programme from a position of demonstrated improvement, having achieved a Grade 1 outcome at its November 2024 Local Area SEND inspection and EHCP timeliness performance of 95.45%, against a national average of 39.6%.
- 4.3 The Department for Education has confirmed Bedford Borough's Experts at Hand and Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund allocation for 2026/2027 as £1,614,322; this report seeks approval to accept that funding and to delegate authority for its allocation.

5. DETAILS

National and Local Context

- 5.1 The Government's SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan identified the need for a more inclusive, consistent and financially stable SEND system. Central to the reform agenda is a shift towards earlier intervention, greater access to specialist expertise, stronger inclusion within mainstream education and improved partnership working across education, health and care.
- 5.2 In March 2026, all local areas were required to develop a Local SEND Reform Plan setting out how they will implement these reforms within their local context.
- 5.3 Bedford Borough enters this programme from a position of demonstrated improvement. The Borough achieved a Grade 1 outcome at its November 2024 Local Area SEND inspection, following a sustained improvement journey since a joint Ofsted/CQC inspection in 2018. EHCP timeliness stands at 95.45%, well ahead of the national average of 39.6%. At the same time, demand for SEND support continues to rise, placing pressure on the High Needs Block and reinforcing the case for further transformation.

Development of the Local SEND Reform Plan

- 5.4 Bedford Borough's Local SEND Reform Plan was submitted to the Department for Education on 19 June 2026 and was developed through the Borough's SEND Local Area Partnership, reflecting the shared contribution of education, health, care and parent carer representatives.

- 5.5 The Plan builds on Bedford's existing SEND improvement programme, including work already underway to strengthen inclusion, reduce reliance on permanent exclusion and improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND, and brings this activity together within a single framework for reform.
- 5.6 The Plan has been co-produced with local area partners across health, education and care, together with the Bedford Borough Parent Carer Forum, and children and young people, ensuring that local children, young people and parent carer voices and lived experience have informed its development.

The Experts at Hand Model

- 5.7 The Experts at Hand model is the central delivery mechanism within the Local SEND Reform Plan. It is designed to give schools and settings coordinated access to specialist expertise, enabling earlier intervention, strengthening inclusion and improving outcomes for children and young people.
- 5.8 The model will bring together a multidisciplinary team of professionals — including Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Family Help, Mental Health practitioners and SEND Advisory Teachers — working more closely with schools through enhanced Team Around the School arrangements to identify needs earlier, strengthen inclusive practice and improve access to support.
- 5.9 Between formal Team Around the School meetings, support may include coaching, training, consultation, group work, environmental audits, curriculum advice and implementation support, extending the impact of specialist expertise across school systems as well as for individual children and young people.

Governance and Accountability

- 5.10 Strategic oversight of SEND reform in Bedford Borough is provided through the SEND Improvement Board, which is chaired by the Portfolio Holder and reviews performance and improvement action plans on a quarterly basis.
- 5.11 The Education Improvement Governance Group, also chaired by the Portfolio Holder, provides oversight of the Education Strategy Action Plan, while the School Performance Clinic — involving the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Portfolio Holder and Chief Executive — reviews Borough-wide and school-level attainment and outcomes. The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee provides additional governance and accountability.

- 5.12 Use of Experts at Hand funding, and progress against delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan, will be monitored and reported through these existing governance arrangements.

Funding and Financial Implications

- 5.13 The Local SEND Reform Plan is supported by a programme of national investment intended to enable local areas to implement reform, strengthen inclusion and improve long-term sustainability.
- 5.14 The Department for Education has confirmed Bedford Borough's allocation under the Experts at Hand and Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund for 2026/2027 as **£1,614,322**, calculated using the Department's published funding formula (a per-pupil rate, weighted for pupils eligible for free school meals in the last six years and for low prior attainment, adjusted for area cost). This funding will support development of the Experts at Hand model, workforce capacity, programme management and associated implementation activity.
- 5.15 The grant is paid in a single annual instalment, at the end of June 2026, and forms the first year of a three-year spending review settlement: nationally, the programme provides £1.8 billion in Experts at Hand funding and a share of £200 million in transformation funding over the period, with indicative (unconfirmed) national funding of approximately £750 million in 2027/2028 and £850 million in 2028/2029. Funding may be carried forward past March 2027 but must be spent by September 2027.
- 5.16 Under the grant conditions, at least 80% of the funding must be spent on direct Experts at Hand delivery, no more than 10% on administration of the offer, and no more than 10% on local authority transformation costs. The funding cannot be used to provide support already named in a child's Education, Health and Care Plan, to fund EHCP assessment, to replace provision schools should make themselves, or for wider social care or family support that is funded separately (for example Family First Partnerships or Mental Health Support Teams).
- 5.17 Given the pace of implementation required, it is proposed that delegated authority is provided to the Service Director for Education, SEND and School Infrastructure, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder and relevant finance officers, to allocate and distribute the funding in accordance with the approved Local SEND Reform Plan and DfE grant conditions.

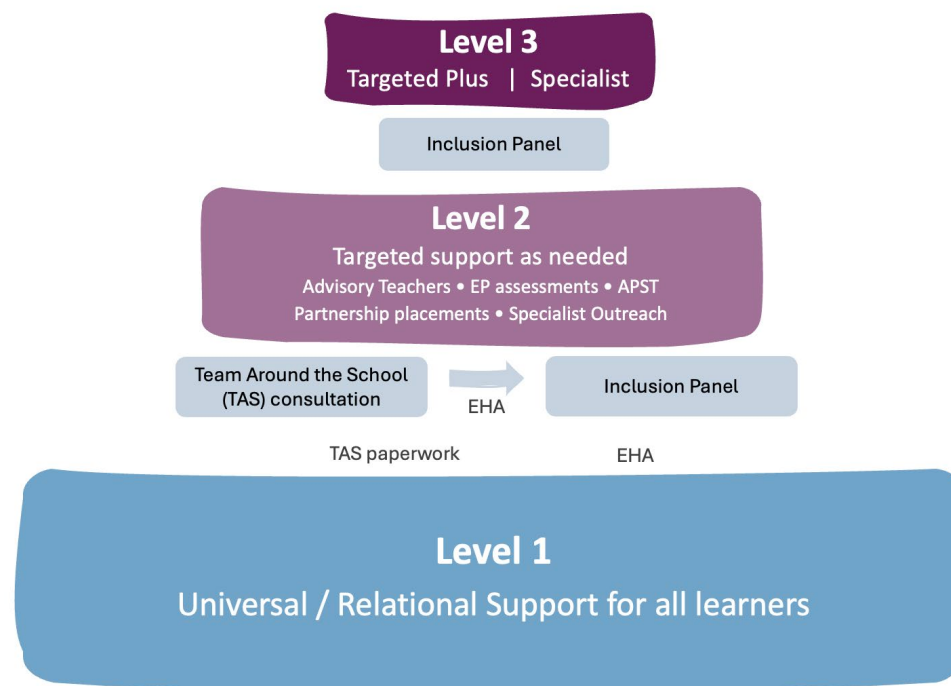
The Experts at Hand Model of Delivery

- 5.18 The proposed Bedford Borough model (see Figure 1) operates across three layers of support (see Figure 2), aligned to the tiers of need described within the SEND reforms. In the Universal, 'relational' layer, every school and setting will have a named, consistent multi-disciplinary team — covering Educational Psychology, Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Mental Health, Family Help, Inclusion Support, Community Paediatrics, SENDCO support and dedicated Parent Carer Navigators — who build ongoing relationships with schools rather than responding only when a referral is made.

Figure 1: who is involved in the Experts at Hand Offer



Figure 2: Three layers of support designed to meet local needs



- 5.19 Within the universal/relational layer (Level 1), every school will access a named, consistent team of specialist professionals through a locality-based cluster. Support will include a regular Team Around the School (TAS) drop-in for alongside whole-school CPD and in-setting coaching delivered by the same named professionals, so that training reflects the reality of each individual setting rather than being delivered by providers unfamiliar with it.
- 5.20 Where a child or school needs more than the relational layer can provide, access moves to Layer 2 (targeted support) via a newly created Inclusion Panel. The Panel meets weekly to review Early Help Assessments and allocate support such as specialist outreach, advisory teacher input, Alternative Provision Strategic Taskforce involvement, or Education Psychology assessment. A Team Around the School consultation is not a precondition for referral into Layer 2.
- 5.21 Layer 3 (targeted plus/specialist) covers referrals to the SEND panel for Education, Health and Care needs assessment and, where required, specialist placement. Children and young people at this layer continue to benefit from Team Around the School and Inclusion Panel support alongside statutory processes.
- 5.22 The model extends beyond mainstream schools to early years settings — to be piloted in 50 settings from Summer 2027 — and to further education providers, recognising that SEND needs do not stop at statutory school age and that early intervention in the pre-school years offers the greatest long-term impact.
- 5.23 Delivery has been directly informed by engagement with children, young people and families, including through a Hub and Spoke consultation, and builds on two years of learning from the Team Around the School pilot, which demonstrated that named, trusted and reachable professionals lead schools to act earlier and reduces reliance on specialist placement.

Next Steps and Implementation Timeline

19 June 2026	Local SEND Reform Plan submitted to the Department for Education
Summer 2026	Confirmation of Experts at Hand implementation funding; grant acceptance and mobilisation activity (this report)
Autumn 2026	Establishment of delivery plans and commencement of workstreams
2026/2027	Expansion of Team Around the School arrangements and implementation of the Experts at Hand model
2026/2027 onwards	Delivery of reform workstreams and ongoing evaluation
2027 onwards	Embedding of reforms and continuous improvement

6. **ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED AND REJECTED**

- 6.1 The alternative option would be to decline or defer acceptance of the grant. This is not recommended, as it would delay implementation of the Local SEND Reform Plan and risk the funding being reallocated nationally.

7. **KEY IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 Legal Issues	The proposed acceptance of grant funding, and the delegation sought, have regard to the Council's statutory duties in relation to SEND, including the Children and Families Act 2014, and to the Department for Education's grant conditions. Compliance with grant conditions is mandatory; failure to comply with eligibility, monitoring or reporting requirements may result in the withholding of future funding or recovery of funding already provided.
7.2 Policy Issues	Acceptance of the grant and delivery of the Local SEND Reform Plan supports the Council's ambitions to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND, strengthen inclusion and support long-term sustainability of the local SEND system.
7.3 Resource Issues	The Department for Education has confirmed Bedford Borough's allocation under the Experts at Hand and Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund for 2026/2027 as £1,614,322, paid as a single instalment. At least 80% must be spent on direct Experts at Hand delivery, no more than 10% on administration and no more than 10% on transformation costs; funding cannot be used for support already named in an EHCP, for EHCP assessment, for provision schools should make themselves, or for separately funded social care or family support. This is the first year of a three-year spending review settlement, with indicative (unconfirmed) national funding of approximately £750 million in 2027/2028 and £850 million in 2028/2029. Bedford Borough's Dedicated Schools Grant High Needs deficit forecast currently stands at approximately £6 million. The Council's Local SEND Reform Plan is currently being reviewed by the Department for Education; if approved, the Department has indicated it will allocate a High Needs Recovery Grant covering 90% of the Council's eligible High Needs deficit accrued to the end of 2025/2026, anticipated to be in the region of £1.4 million. Successful delivery of the Experts at Hand offer is instrumental both to reducing the underlying deficit and to securing this Recovery Grant, and the Department has confirmed that future decisions on support for High Needs deficits arising in 2026/2027 and 2027/2028 will have regard to local authorities' successful delivery of their approved Plan.
7.4 Risks	The principal risks associated with implementation relate to workforce capacity, stakeholder engagement, national policy developments, delivery across multiple organisations and achievement of intended programme outcomes. These risks will be monitored through established governance arrangements, including the SEND Improvement Board and the Experts at Hand Steering Group.

7.5 Environmental Implications	This report has no specific environmental implications.
7.6 Equalities Impact	The Local SEND Reform Plan is fundamentally designed to improve equity of access, inclusion and outcomes for children and young people with SEND, who are recognised as a group protected under the Equality Act 2010. The Experts at Hand model supports a more equitable system by providing a consistent offer available to all schools and settings, reducing variability in access to specialist expertise and ensuring support is available at the earliest possible stage.
7.7 Impact on Families	Families of children and young people with SEND are expected to benefit from earlier access to specialist support and a more consistent offer across schools and settings as the Experts at Hand model is implemented.
7.8 Community Safety and Resilience	This report has no specific implications for Community Safety and Resilience.
7.9 Impact on Health and Wellbeing	The Experts at Hand model brings together education, health and care professionals to support children and young people's wellbeing at the earliest possible stage; wider health and wellbeing implications will continue to be considered through the Local Area Partnership.

8. SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS AND OUTCOME

8.1 The following Councillors, Council units, Officers and/or other organisations have been consulted in preparing this report:

Portfolio Holder for Valuing Families: Children's Services
Portfolio Holder for Financial Services & Financial Sustainability
Children's Senior Leadership Team
Section 151 Officer/Finance Business Partner (Children's Services)
Legal Services

9. WARD COUNCILLOR VIEWS

9.1 Not Applicable

10. CONTACTS AND REFERENCES

Report Contact Officer:	Chris Morris, Service Director for Education, SEND and School Infrastructure
Declarations of Interest by the Report Author:	None
File Reference:	None
Previous Relevant Minutes:	None
Background Papers:	Department for Education, <i>Experts at Hand & Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund: funding for local authorities 2026 to 2027</i>, updated 5 June 2026: https://gov.uk/government/publications/experts-at-hand-local-authority-send-transformation-fund/experts-at-hand-local-authority-send-transformation-fund-funding-for-local-authorities-2026-to-2027 Department for Education, <i>Experts at Hand & Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund: grant conditions</i>, updated 5 June 2026: https://gov.uk/government/publications/experts-at-hand-local-authority-send-transformation-fund/experts-at-hand-local-authority-send-transformation-fund-grant-conditions Department for Education, <i>Experts at Hand and LA SEND Transformation Fund (2026-27): allocations to local authorities</i> (final allocations spreadsheet) — Bedford allocation: £1,614,322
Appendices:	None