

Education and SEND White Paper

As Lead Member for Children's Services, I want to update the Panel on the publication of the Government's new Education and SEND white paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, released on 23rd February 2026. This marks a significant national shift towards a broader, more inclusive education system, with a clear focus on re-engaging families, reducing persistent absence, and strengthening the services surrounding schools. The Government has presented this as a long-term reform programme designed to take the education system "into the 2030s and beyond," indicating that implementation will be phased and sustained over a number of years.

A major component of the reforms is the accompanying SEND consultation, *Putting Children and Young People First*. This consultation initiates the statutory process for reshaping SEND support nationally, including a reformed universal offer, Individual Support Plans, and strengthened early identification. Some elements already carry clear implementation timescales: the Inclusive Mainstream Fund (£1.6 billion) and the Experts at Hand specialist workforce programme (£1.8 billion) are planned across a three-year period from 2026–2029, allowing early years settings, schools, and colleges to build inclusive practice and access the right specialist expertise.

The white paper also includes the 6,500 additional teachers delivery plan, intended to be achieved by the end of this Parliament, giving an indicative timescale up to 2029. Meanwhile, the Government's ambition for all schools to be part of strong multi-academy trusts continues without a set deadline. Together, these reforms represent a staged programme of change across 2026–2029, with further system development expected into the early 2030s. As Lead Member, I will ensure the Panel continues to receive updates as this national programme evolves.

Officers will now begin interpreting what these reforms could mean for B&NES. The DFE has asked all LAs, including our Local Area Inclusion Partnership, to start working with partners and schools to complete a DFE Maturity Matrix to assist with advanced preparation for the reforms. I will report back to the Panel as this analysis and assessment develops. I have also asked Officers to prepare an information workshop to 'unpack' the reforms for Cllrs and Partners.

Important to note that we are expected to continue operating in the current SEND system until March 29, whilst preparing for the implementation of the reforms. We expect demand for EHCPs to increase during this period.

A link to the published Education & SEND white paper is included below.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving>

B&NES Safety Valve Programme

At the last Scrutiny Panel meeting, I advised Members that our Safety Valve agreement remained on hold pending further national announcements and that we were expecting clarity either ahead of or alongside the new Education and SEND White Paper. I also highlighted the Department for Education's intention to assume direct responsibility for funding SEND from 2028, signalling a significant long-term shift in the financial arrangements for high needs.

Since that time, we have received formal written confirmation from the DfE that the national Safety Valve programme has now officially closed. In addition, the DfE has confirmed that it will fund 90% of all remaining high needs deficits accumulated up to the end of the 2025/26 financial year. These accumulated deficits are currently held by all Local Authorities, but do not form part of the council's overall budget due to a Government statutory override. There has been growing sector concern about the financial risks they could pose if the Government makes these deficits the responsibility of Local Authorities. The Government's commitment to covering the vast majority of this historic debt provides substantial relief to Local Authorities nationally, including B&NES, who feared being required to absorb these deficits at the point the override ends.

What remains unclear—both from the DfE communication and the Education and SEND White Paper—is what will happen to the deficits expected to continue to accumulate between 2026 and 2028, when the DfE formally takes on direct responsibility for SEND funding. At present, the DfE announcements do not specify whether central Government will also meet these two years of additional deficits, whether they will be subject to new conditions, or whether they may fall back to individual Local Authorities.

I expect further information to emerge over the coming months as the Government provides more clarity on the future SEND funding model, the accountability arrangements that will accompany it, and how transitional years will be managed. Officers will continue to analyse each announcement carefully and will bring updates to Members as soon as they become available. This will help B&NES assess the local implications, understand potential financial exposure, and plan strategically for the period leading up to 2028.

SEND & Better Together

I am pleased to see that a report from Laura Donnelly is on the agenda today, covering a number of questions about EHCPs that have been raised at previous scrutiny panels. I have also previously updated the Panel that I attend Better Together meetings alongside our B&NES Parent Carer Forum and LA staff to look at how we continue to work together positively and constructively.

At the last Better Together meeting on 23 February, we engaged in a collaborative and constructive discussion focused on strengthening relationships with parents and carers, and on the continued drive for inclusive education across Bath and North

East Somerset. Three key items were highlighted: the Department for Education (DfE) Maturity Matrix, as mentioned above, a "You Said, We Did" response to parent carers to highlight how our SEND team continues to improve its communications in response to parent carers feedback, and the launch of a new "Ordinarily Available Provision" document (Link below) for all B&NES schools, outlining clear expectations for inclusive support in every setting. I am very supportive of these developments and welcome all steps toward inclusive education and strong partnership working that unite local education providers and communities.

<https://www.bathnes.gov.uk/inclusion-and-send-commitment-ordinarily-available-provision>

B&NES Free Schools – Update

As I write this update, officers are finalising our plans and response to the DFE regarding our commitment to the delivery of Free Schools on the Culverhay site. We are committed to making this happen and must provide a formal response to the DFE by 27th February 2026. I will provide a further update verbally at the PDS meeting on 9th of March 2026.

SACRE

The 2024–25 reporting year shows steady and positive progress for the Bath & North East Somerset SACRE, which continued to meet its statutory duties in monitoring and supporting Religious Education (RE) and Collective Worship. Key achievements included approval of the revised SACRE Constitution, completion and circulation of major updated Collective Worship guidance, and reconvening of the Agreed Syllabus Conference to begin the 2027. Schools continued to be supported through newsletters, CPD, networks, and access to syllabus resources, and no complaints or withdrawals from RE were recorded.

Standards across schools were generally positive. Ofsted inspections highlighted strengths in cultural and religious understanding, while all four Church of England schools inspected under SIAMS achieved Judgement 1. GCSE Religious Studies outcomes varied, with some schools performing strongly—such as Writhlington with a 90.9% pass rate. SACRE operations were strengthened through an improved action log, although membership vacancies remain. The standalone SACRE website is being discontinued due to low usage and high costs, with its content transitioning to an LA-hosted page.

Information on Academy Schools in B&NES.

One of the proposals in the Education White Paper is that all schools should join a Multi-Academy Trust and that LAs will have the powers to form new Trusts, where needed. As you know, B&NES is now nearly fully academised, with only 5 schools remaining maintained.

The remaining schools are in eight Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Three schools remain as Single Academy Trusts.

The MATs vary in size. The Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership has the highest number of primary and secondary schools in B&NES.

In terms of Primary schools, The Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership and The Partnership Trust are MATs comprised predominantly of schools located in B&NES. The Bath and Wells Diocesan Academies Trust also has a large number of B&NES primary schools, but more are located outside B&NES.

In terms of Secondary schools, the Midsomer Norton Schools Partnership has the highest number in B&NES.

Families First Programme of Reforms

Following recent reporting to this Panel, I want to briefly update all on continued progress. Transformation work continues towards implementing the key Family First Programme of reforms from July 2026. This programme represents a significant opportunity for Children's Services across the council to support earlier intervention that includes and supports families to work with professionals in a way that prevents the escalation of need and risk and need for acute service provision, including care. This work includes:

- a. Family Group Decision Making
- b. Family Help Teams to ensure more seamless support
- c. Multi agency Child Protection Teams to support effective decision making when children are at risk of or suffer harm.

In Bath and North East Somerset, we are combining these changes with our Smarter Structures work, the council wide approach to reviewing and developing our ways of working. The service has now entered a phase of formal consultation which will be concluded at the end of April 2026.

Industrial Action update – Children's Services

A joint statement was issued on 25th February 2026, in respect of the industrial action in Children's Services that following constructive talks where positive and productive progress was made, Unison agreed to suspend the proposed strike action scheduled for 2nd, 3rd, 11th and 13th March while further work is undertaken to try to resolve issues. Discussions at this stage remain strictly confidential. Further updates will be provided as soon as more information can be shared.

Permanent Assistant Director - Children's Services

I previously informed you that we have appointed a permanent Assistant Director for Children's Services. Paul Shallcross will be joining us on 13th April. Paul is an experienced Assistant Director and we look forward to welcoming him. I want to take some time to offer my thanks and appreciation for Phoebe Holland, who has been

the interim Assistant Director since June 2025. Phoebe stepped up into this role to support the service and when Paul joins us she will return to a Head of Service position. She has worked tirelessly to support the service during this time.

MJ Awards

I am delighted to share news that two services have been shortlisted as finalists for the upcoming MJ Awards in June 2026.

The Virtual School for Innovation in Children's and Adults Services

Fostering Families for Innovation in Children's and Adults Services.