SEND SUFFICIENCY PLAN PROGRESS UPDATE

Cabinet Report 09 March 2026

PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL

1. Purpose

1.1 The purpose of this paper is to update Cabinet on progress of the SEND Capital and Sufficiency plan in the context of National Reforms published on 23 February 2026. The paper also describes the actions taken towards the rebuild of Mill Ford School and the mandate to take it forward through the Capital Plan. The paper details what we have delivered so far, using our High Needs Capital Allocation. It outlines how National Reforms have influenced our work to date and our forthcoming detailed sufficiency plan that we will be able to publish in June with details of the Government's Every Child Achieving and Thriving White Paper underpinning the plan.

1.2 There has been substantial growth in children subject to an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), nationally and in Plymouth. We have seen an increase in the growth of Education Health Care Plans (EHCP) over the last year and half, from 2756 in September 2024 to 3654 in January 2026, an increase of 898 children.

1.3 88.8% of children with an EHCP are receiving education and support within a Plymouth school and setting. However, 6.3% are placed within a Non-maintained Special School, Special Post 16 Institution or Independent Special School with 11.2% with an EHCP receiving education in a setting outside Plymouth. 64.4% of those being educated outside of Plymouth are placed within a Non-maintained Special School, Special Post 16 Institution or Independent Special school. 2.2% are placed within other Local Authorities' special schools (predominantly Devon Local Authority.)

1.4 405 children and young people are being taught outside of Plymouth and of these 261 are in Independent Special Schools.

1.5 We are revising our SEND Sufficiency Needs Assessment to inform our more detailed plan taking into consideration the content of and direction towards mainstream inclusion in the White Paper. This will build on the work we have already done to understand the type of provision and number of places required. It is a requirement of the Local Area Partnership to produce an updated plan in light of Reforms, and we will update and provide a detailed sufficiency plan as part of this work, by April to our Local Area SEND Partnership Board and then take forward to Cabinet for approval.

2. Background

2.1 In Plymouth, we have high expectations for all our children and young people, whatever their starting point. Access to a quality learning pathway, from childhood through to adulthood, enabling them to thrive and develop the life skills that will support them into a productive and happy adulthood, is the root of our Council ambition to ensure that children of all abilities do well in education, gaining important skills and expertise for life.

2.2 We believe that all children in Plymouth should have access to an education in the community where they live to ensure that they have opportunity to thrive and be part of their local community, creating a positive pathway to adulthood. The Belonging Framework and the Plymouth Place-based Plan, co-produced across our Local Area SEND Partnership, both aim to improve school attendance and educational outcomes by fostering a sense of belonging to support children to feel safe, recognised and valued. This underpins our systemic approach to support all children and young people, including those with SEND, to thrive.

2.3 Great provision starts with the buildings where learning happens, from early years through to post-19, and with spaces that are inclusive and accessible for all children. Investing in safe, high-quality and inspiring and inclusive early years settings, school and college provision is essential to delivering high quality education, creating the conditions for our children and young people to succeed. We will create high quality education environments for all children and young people within their local area.

2.4 In order to support children and young people with SEND across Plymouth a range of provision needs to be developed, ensuring we are in line with SEND reforms announced on 23 February 2026. We need to build on the work we have already started we need to continue with the regional Department for Education (DfE), CEOs of Multi-Academy Trusts and schools to adapt our school estate to be more inclusive and accessible, with the aim of educating and supporting more children and young people with SEND in mainstream settings. Environmental features in mainstream schools have a big impact on the extent to which children and young people with SEND can access settings successfully. Therefore, we need to ensure that our school buildings can support the range and complexity of needs of our children.

2.5 Alongside this we need to ensure that there are enough special school places for children from early years through to young people post 16 / post 19, for the life course of their education. Some children require specialist provision that cannot be provided in mainstream settings. There are not enough places in the City and one of our schools requires a rebuild. Through the rebuild, we are seeking to ensure more children requiring specialist provision can have this provided in the City, in an outstanding Local Authority maintained special school.

3. What we have achieved so far

3.1 Our capital investment into Plymouth Schools over the last eighteen months has increased both the places for children and young people with SEND, and the quality of resources in a number of specialist settings. For pupils with SEND, we have provided over 70 places in our Special Schools and Resource Provisions. The SEND Units in mainstream schools ensure that pupils not only have access to areas designed to meet their needs but are also able to be fully included in the wider school. This provision has proven important in Plymouth to provide a continuum between mainstream and special schools. The following table provides an overview by school of our successful delivery of additional places and the cost avoidance of each project. This cost avoidance is applicable year on year.

School / project	**Longcause**	**Riverside**	**Woodlands** (due to open 2026)	**Ernesettle** (due to open 2026)
A Places created	8	50	15*	18**
B Annual cost / space	£35,265	£31,876	£35,763	£31,876
C Cost of external placement	£69,300	£69,300	£69,300	£69,300
D Cost avoidance / pupil (C-B)	£34,035	£37,424	£33,537	£37,424
E Annual cost avoidance to DSG (DxA)	**£272,280**	**£1,871,200**	**£503,055**	**£673,632**
School transport cost avoidance @ average £3k per pupil	£24,000	£150,000	£45,000	£54,000

**10 pupils currently being accommodated at the school in an interim arrangement until classrooms complete*
***16-20 pupils will be accommodated in the new classrooms*

3.2 In anticipation of the national reforms we developed a targeted funding model for children to access mainstream provision and gain earlier help, to ensure their needs are met without the requirement of an education health and care plan. Three hundred and eighty children are currently benefitting from this provision, and none have yet required an EHCP. This is the kind of support that the Government has announced in the Reforms through the requirement of Individual Support Plans (ISPs) for children, with expectations for needs to be identified and met much earlier. For the children attending the targeted funding provision, attendance has improved significantly and many are achieving better educational outcomes and children are feeling they belong in their mainstream schools. Parent / carer trust in their child's education has improved and feedback is positive. It is also having a very positive impact on teaching staff in targeted funding provision.

3.3 This activity has enabled us to work in deep collaboration with our education community and to establish a collective accountability for spend in the High Needs Block, which has prepared us well for the reforms. This has led to a Place Based Plan and Belonging Framework, adopted by all schools and furthermore to Plymouth being a case study in the White Paper. A recent visit from Dr Tim Coulson enabled the education partnership in Plymouth to share the extent of this work and how it has made a real difference to children and young people in Plymouth.

4. High Needs Capital Allocation

4.1 The High Needs Capital Allocation is awarded based on statutory returns that outline the needs of Plymouth children and young people. We have been prudent with our use of the allocation.
We have spent and committed c.£2.75M of our capital grants and have c.£12.9M remaining. Two significant factors have prevented us from developing further SEND projects. These are:

- The need for a new Mill Ford School before 2030, which will cost more than £12.9m and therefore will rely on council capital investment. The cost of the new school is dependent on many factors and therefore it is important to retain some capital allocation to ensure we can deliver this project. Capital allocation has been utilised to undertake feasibility. (see 4.3 and 4.4)
- Anticipating detailed announcements of Reform to ensure any capital investment is in line with policy changes.

There is a new opportunity for Plymouth to bid for new Government education capital grants before 23 April, which we are already working on.

4.2 We know there is further investment in adapting mainstream schools, both directly to schools and in capital grants to Local Authorities. Our share of the announced £3bn is yet to be determined and the amount will depend on the formulae applied.

4.3 There has been a Council Capital allocation of £200,000 for feasibility work into increasing SEND capacity within the school estate. This has been used to develop the projects shown in the table above in 3.1.

4.4 A capital project mandate for a new school to replace Mill Ford was approved by the Council's Capital Programme Board in August 2025. This has given authority to proceed with project development and a feasibility budget of £200,000 was approved for this purpose.

5. The National Reforms and how this has impacted our strategy and plan

5.1 Since the development of The Plymouth City Council Special Education Needs and Disabilities Sufficiency Plan 2024, we have anticipated the Governments landmark Schools' White Paper which

represents another step in the Government's drive to ensure children with SEND can have their needs met in mainstream schools and provision.

5.2 Another key release has been the Education Estates Strategy: a Decade of National Renewal on the 16 February 2026 Appendix 1. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-estates-strategy/education-estates-strategy-a-decade-of-national-renewal
It is now confirmed that we need to move to adapting our school estate to be more inclusive and accessible to support more children and young people with SEND to thrive in their local mainstream schools.

5.3 A new term "Inclusion Bases" will replace the current terms: SEN unit, resourced provision and pupil support unit to make it easier for parents to understand the support available for their child. There will now be an expectation that this provision should become a core part of the local education offer, delivering high quality teaching and support to children who would benefit from provision that bridges the current gap between mainstream and specialist.

5.4 This will be expected alongside enhancing the mainstream estate from early years to post-16 to be more inclusive and accessible for pupils with neurodivergence, disability and other kinds of needs. Dedicated guidance on high-impact adaptations for the Estate to make it more inclusive and accessible is due to be published to support us and our schools to make these changes.

5.5 The Government has confirmed it expects that every secondary school will, in time, have an inclusion base – a dedicated safe space away from busy classrooms where pupils can access targeted support that bridges the gap between mainstream and specialist provision.

6. Plymouth's Capital Growth and Sufficiency

6.1 Work initially identified from the SEND sufficiency strategy in 2024 indicated that growth was required. This was further refined in 2025, where we established that based on current need that an additional three hundred and ninety-six places are needed to meet the rise of special needs.

6.2 Since publication of the Schools' White Paper and the change of direction from Government the education team are developing a refreshed SEND sufficiency strategy to 2030, with more certainty of what is expected and increased understanding of how the deficit in the High Needs Block will be managed.

6.3 Central Government have announced that they will introduce support for Local Authorities with deficits in the High Needs Block in phases. All local authorities with a SEND deficit will be eligible in 2026-27 to receive a **High Needs Stability Grant** covering up to 90% of their High Needs-related DSG deficit.

6.4 In our SEND Sufficiency plan we will now plan provision from across early, years through to post 19 in one sufficiency document, underpinned by the principle of mainstream inclusion and aspiring to build capacity to bring back Plymouth children educated outside of Plymouth, wherever appropriate and possible, and particularly at key transition points.

6.5 We will plan with our schools to develop inclusion Bases, with a focus on secondary schools, whilst also ensuring that there are enough special school places for children from early years children through to young people post 16 / post 19 who are entitled to specialist provision. In developing the SEND sufficiency needs assessment and capital plan we want to spend money wisely to save in other areas such as the High Needs Block and Home to School Transport. Our plans will be highly ambitious for children.

7. Falling school rates and understanding our School Estate

7.1 In Plymouth we have a falling birth rate, resulting in capacity in our mainstream schools. Utilising our existing school estate, work has been undertaken to identify six primary schools which have up to a single-form entry of capacity and the school layout could lend itself to adaptation to an inclusion base.

7.2 In developing this provision over the next year this will prevent primary age children needing to attend costly specialist independent schools, many of which are outside of Plymouth and therefore costly in terms of transport as well as education.

7.3 We will ensure we move at pace and expect that over the next year we will create up to an additional 140 places for children. The cost avoidance in the High Needs Block and for Home to School Transport will be variable, depending on the needs of the children, but cost avoidance will be inevitable when compared with independent specialist placements, often outside of the City.

7.4 Replacement of Mill Ford Special School is on the Capital Forward Plan and is a priority project. The school caters for pupils with complex needs, including severe and profound needs, multiple learning difficulties, complex medical needs and autism spectrum disorder across the age ranges from 3-19. As part of a rebuild we want to increase the numbers of children attending the school and we are identifying sites that can accommodate an increase in pupils. There is an expected average reduced cost of £37,424 year on year in the High Needs Block, for each pupil that attends a maintained special school rather than an independent special school, on average, with a further £3,000 per pupil in Home to School Transport Revenue costs. Therefore, the more capacity in the new school, the better the savings to both the Dedicated Schools Grant and to revenue. More importantly, it is better for our children who will access an education closer to home, family and friends.

8. Relationships with our settings and schools

8.1 We have strong relationships with our settings and schools, and the extent of the collaboration has been recognised through our SEND Monitoring Inspection, and through a DfE visit with Dr Tim Coulson, as well as part of the White Paper as a case study for improving educational outcomes as a system. This effective collaboration has been established through robust governance arrangements as well as focused work on improving attendance and reducing exclusions, suspensions, and improving attainment and outcomes for learners across all key stages. This has led to the development of the Place Based Plan and Belonging Framework and improved outcomes across all key stages and a narrowing of the gap for disadvantaged learners.

8.2 There remains more to do for learners with SEND and this is aided by the focus on inclusion in the National Reforms. As such, we have excellent foundations on which to build further work. As we have a highly academised system, collaboration with MAT leaders and the DfE will be key in adapting the Estate to meet the needs of children in mainstream. Our school leaders have the appetite to do this well, and to manage the High Needs Block with sharp focus on best value for money and best outcomes for SEND learners. We are holding a SEND Summit in June, with the entire partnership focused on Plymouth children belonging and being educated in our City.

9. Measures and Impact

9.1 We want to make sure there are enough high-quality schools and places for children and young people with SEND, close to where they live to ensure that there will be an increased percentage of children and young people with SEND educated in maintained or academy special schools, rather than independent settings, an increased percentage of those being educated in mainstream settings, and a decrease in the percentage of children and young people having to travel long distances to school.

This is entirely in keeping with Reforms. We will measure the success of our efforts and will provide regular reports of progress through our governance structure.

10. Governance arrangements

10.1 To meet the renewed need for Plymouth to deliver a large-scale education capital programme new governance arrangements have been implemented to ensure we take a One Plymouth approach across all Directorates to supporting delivery of the programme.

10.2 A new Strategic Board has been developed and will be responsible for setting and agreeing the strategic direction and delivering the outcomes required. David Haley, Director of Children Services, will be the SRO, and Chair of the Board.

10.3 The Operational Board which oversee the delivery of the SEND sufficiency needs assessment and sufficiency plan will be chaired by the Head of SEND and will meet fortnightly to maintain pace and progress to the work.

11. Summary

Plymouth is committed to ensuring that all children and young people, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), can access high- quality, inclusive education within their local communities. The Council has already expanded SEND provision, created new specialist places, and introduced targeted early- intervention funding aligned with National Reforms. With further government expectations for more inclusive mainstream environments and the development of new "Inclusion Bases," Plymouth is refreshing its SEND sufficiency plan to increase local capacity from early years through post- 19, reduce reliance on independent placements, and manage High Needs Block pressures. Falling birth rates create opportunities to repurpose school estate space, while the rebuild of Mill Ford School remains a major capital priority. Strong partnerships with schools, new governance arrangements, and a focus on value for money will support the delivery of an ambitious capital programme designed to improve outcomes, inclusion, and local access for children and young people with SEND.