

Staffordshire Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision Strategy

2026 - 2029



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Purpose and introduction

This joint Strategy, developed by Staffordshire County Council and the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board and our partners sets out our ambition and the outcomes we want for our children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those who access alternative provision. It reflects our shared commitment across the local area partnership to improve experiences and outcomes.

What is SEND?

A child or young person has special educational needs (SEN) if they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for special educational provision to be made for them.

According to the SEND Code of Practice (2015), a child or young person has a learning difficulty or disability if they:

- Have significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or
- Have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or post-16 settings.

SEN Support refers to the additional help provided to children and young people with SEN who do not have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

(Source: Arranging Alternative Provision - A Guide for Local Authorities and Schools, DfE, February 2025)

What is alternative provision?

Alternative provision refers to education arranged by local authorities for children of compulsory school age who, due to exclusion, illness, or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education. It also includes provision arranged by schools for pupils on a suspension (fixed-period exclusion), or for those directed to off-site settings to receive education aimed at improving their behaviour.

This strategy

This Strategy has been co-produced by the Council and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) with the SEND local area partnership, including children and young people, their parents and carers, and professionals across education, health and care. We recognise the challenges that children and young people with SEND and those accessing alternative provision face, as well as the pressures on their families and those who support them. This strategy sets out our shared commitment to improving the systems and services they rely on, so that every child and young person has the opportunity to thrive and achieve their potential.

We would like to thank everyone involved in the production of the Strategy, and we look forward to working with you to achieve our outcomes.

Cllr Janet Higgins

Cabinet Member for Education and SEND, Staffordshire County Council

Bernie Brown

Director for Children and Families, Staffordshire County Council

Cllr Nicholas Lakin

Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Staffordshire County Council

Simon Whitehouse

Chief Executive Officer for NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin ICB and NHS Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB



Context

This Strategy supports the delivery of priority outcomes set out in key local plans. It reflects the:

Improvements, recommendations, and priorities

Identified in Staffordshire's SEND Self-Evaluation Framework and the SEND Joint Strategic Needs Assessment.

It also contributes to the delivery of our ambition to:

"Offer every Staffordshire child and young person the best start in life, and the chance to achieve their potential"

An ambition of Staffordshire County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-26.

As well as being aligned with:

Joint Commissioning Approach for Children and Young People

Alternative Provision Commissioning Strategy

Staffordshire Short Breaks Sufficiency Statement

NHS Long Term Plan

Staffordshire's Digital Innovation Strategy

Staffordshire's Co Production Promise

'Living My Best Life' Disability and Neurodiversity Strategy

SEND and alternative provision in Staffordshire



Staffordshire is a large county with over **400 schools and academies** providing education for around **125,223 pupils**



As of July 2025, there were **9,182** children and young people with an EHCP, more than double the number reported a decade earlier (3,300 in 2014)



The January 2025 school pupils census found that **16,543** had SEN support needs making up 13% of the school population, which is the same as the England average



Children and young people with an EHCP in Staffordshire are more likely to attend a **special school** than the national average (45% compared to 32%)



Children with SEN support needs in Staffordshire are mainly supported within **mainstream schools**, with just over 1% in alternative provision

659 care experienced young people aged 16-25 (63 of which have an EHCP)

1,294 children in care (198 of which have an EHCP)

198 Children Missing Education

150 young people aged 16-17 with an EHCP were not in Education Employment or Training (NEET)



Between 2019/20 and 2023/24, the number of children and young people accessing alternative provision in Staffordshire increased by **252%** rising from 164 to 578



The main reason for children and young people accessing alternative provision is for **health-related reasons** (including mental and physical health needs)



In 2023/24 children with an EHCP missed at least **11%** of their sessions and those with SEN support needs missed 10%, compared to 6% of children without SEND



81% of Staffordshire's population aged 14 and over with a learning disability took up their offer of a health check in 2024/25 - higher than the national average of 80%



Mental Health Support Teams now support over **150 schools** across Staffordshire - 64% of school-aged children. The remaining schools are supported through the Changes programme

284 young people with SEN Support were NEET or not known

23,309 children are in funded early years provision

1,877 children and young people are electively home educated

What this means for children and young people in Staffordshire

The data paints a clear picture of the scale and diversity of needs in Staffordshire.

With over 9,000 children and young people with an EHCP, and thousands more receiving SEN Support, there is a growing demand for inclusive, high-quality provision. This is being met through robust planning, investment in workforce development and a joined-up commissioning approach.

The fact that most children with SEN Support are educated in mainstream schools reflects Staffordshire's inclusive ethos. It also highlights the importance of continuing to build capacity and confidence within mainstream settings to meet a wide range of needs effectively.

The small proportion of children in alternative provision invites reflection. While it may indicate successful early intervention and inclusive practice, it also prompts us

to consider whether some needs are going unmet or escalating unnecessarily. Health-related reasons are the most common driver for alternative provision access, reinforcing the importance of integrated support across education and health.

The rising number of EHCPs over the past decade signals a trend that continues to inform planning and delivery. Ensuring services remain sustainable, equitable, and responsive to changing needs is a shared priority. This includes addressing any geographical or demographic disparities in access and outcomes.

These insights continue to shape our shared approach, informing how services are designed, how professionals are supported, and how we work in partnership to ensure every child and young person can thrive.



How the SEND and alternative provision strategy was developed

This Strategy has been co-produced by the Council and the ICB, working alongside children, young people, parents and carers, and professionals from across the local area partnership.

We used three main ways to engage people in shaping the Strategy:

A survey designed specifically for children and young people

Four community conversation events held across the county

A digital post-it note tool on our dedicated engagement page, where people could share their thoughts and experiences

In total, 968 people contributed their views through these channels.

When we reviewed and summarised what people told us, we checked back with those who had contributed to check whether the challenges identified felt accurate, whether anything had been missed, and what the local area should prioritise. 668 people helped us to do this!

In addition to the specific co-production activities, we also drew on feedback gathered through a range of other methods and forums. This included insights from ongoing engagement with children, young people, families and professionals, as well as learning from local initiatives, service reviews and the dedicated alternative provision consultation, which provided valuable perspectives on the experiences and needs of children and young people accessing alternative provision.

We recognised the importance of ensuring the Strategy reflects not only what people told us during the formal engagement period, but also the broader context of lived experience and system learning.



Progress made since the last strategy

The Staffordshire SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2021 – 2025 had four priorities that were underpinned by actions, delivered across the partnership.

Priority 1 We communicate well with each other	Priority 2 We work in partnership to meet the needs of children and young people
<p>Staffordshire has strengthened its commitment to co-production through the development of the Co Production Promise and associated Toolkit, which set out clear expectations for involving children, young people, families and professionals in shaping services. Since its launch, we’ve championed co-production across the workforce, raising awareness, building confidence and are supporting the embedding of co-production principles across the SEND pathway. A dedicated co-production campaign in July 2025 saw a further uplift in engagement, and a Community of Practice has been established to share learning and sustain momentum. Recent survey data shows that Council staff report the highest levels of awareness and confidence in co-production, while other sectors such as police and fire are being supported to build capacity. These developments reflect a growing culture of collaboration, where lived experience is increasingly informing both strategic planning and frontline practice.</p> <p>Find out more:</p> <p>Staffordshire’s Co-production Promise - SCVYS Staffordshire Council of Voluntary Youth Services</p> <p>Includes the Co-Production Promise, Toolkit, video resources and tools.</p> <p>Co-production in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire</p> <p>Outlines shared values and commitments to co-production</p> <p>Co-production</p> <p>YouTube - Short videos from strategic leaders, practitioners, and case studies showcasing co-production in action.</p>	<p>The development of the strategic Quality Assurance Framework has created more consistent opportunities for children, young people, and families to share their views, helping to drive continuous improvement across the partnership. This framework provides a shared tool for evaluating quality and identifying areas for development.</p> <p>As the strategic Quality Assurance Framework continues to embed, we’re starting to see the impact. One of the areas of the Framework is complaints and compliments, a recent compliment highlighted the quality of service provided:</p> <p><i>“She was so helpful, professional, and knowledgeable and made the process so easy, shortly afterwards the paperwork arrived in our inboxes. I am very aware of the pressure SEND are under at the moment and its always easy to say what hasn’t been done, but I feel we had a first-class service from SEND today”.</i></p> <p>Feedback like this is vital - it highlights what’s working well and what we can improve. The Framework helps us consistently gather and interpret insights from across the system.</p> <p>Alongside this, the Joint Commissioning Approach for Children and Young People has been introduced to guide how the Council and ICB work together to plan, design, and deliver services. By aligning priorities and pooling resources, this approach ensures that decisions are informed by shared outcomes and a focus on improving experiences for children and families. These developments reflect a shift towards more integrated, outcome-focused working across the system.</p> <p>Joint Commissioning Approach for Children and Young People</p>

Priority 3

We ensure that the right support is available at the right time

Staffordshire has strengthened its SEND and Inclusion Model by introducing the Enhanced Assess Plan Do Review (EAPDR) Pathway, which enables mainstream schools to access tailored support through SEND and Inclusion District Hubs led by school leaders. To further build capacity, Staffordshire’s Enhanced District Inclusion Support (SEDIS) teams have been commissioned, these are collaborative groups of schools working together to improve SEND and inclusion practice. Locality Management Groups now plan, and commission services based on local needs, delivered through the Children and Young People’s Flexible Framework, which provides quality assured, pre-statutory support in both education and community settings. These developments have improved access to early help and strengthened the graduated response, helping schools to identify and meet needs more effectively. Feedback has highlighted the positive impact of these changes:

EAPDR

“I really liked the way in which the meeting was facilitated and structured and actually felt my contribution was welcomed, especially after feeling that for the past two years, my son was getting lost in many people’s opinions and that the behaviour was starting to define him.” “EAPDR has given me, as a parent, and the school a chance to tighten and fasten our seatbelts in readiness for those loop-the-loop moments.”

SEDIS

“The input from professionals was fantastic; the sense of teamwork and collective effort was excellent. The collation of knowledge and recommendations was really useful, and the SEDIS experience and EP support was consistently brilliant - supportive, research-led, and generous with advice.”

Priority 4

We encourage communities to be inclusive

The Whole School SEND Project has supported over 200 schools to embed inclusive practice through structured self-evaluation, peer review, and direct support from Council-funded SEND Review Coordinators (SRCs). SRCs lead training, coaching, and networking for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), helping schools to identify priorities and implement improvements.

This work has built confidence and collaboration across the sector, ensuring children and young people with SEND are supported to thrive in their local schools. Early Years settings also benefit from targeted support to promote inclusion, with additional training and development opportunities available through the Early Years Practitioner Hub.

These initiatives are helping to create inclusive environments across all phases of education, where staff feel equipped to meet diverse needs and children feel understood and supported.

What children and young people told us

Children and young people shared a wide range of experiences about their education and support. While many described positive relationships with teachers and enjoyment of learning and activities, others highlighted significant challenges.

Key themes from their feedback:

Positive relationships and support

Children value being with friends and appreciate teachers and support staff who understand their needs.

Barriers to inclusion

Some children feel misunderstood, excluded, or unsafe in their settings. Bullying, discrimination, and lack of empathy were recurring concerns.

Support outside of school

Most children know where to get help, often turning to family, friends and professionals.

Preparation for adulthood

Older children asked for more support with life skills, employment, and managing finances.

Inclusive environments

Children want learning environments that adapt to their needs, such as shorter lessons, sensory breaks, or one-to-one support.

Mental health and wellbeing

Children emphasised the importance of feeling safe, supported, and genuinely heard.



The views of children and young people were central to shaping this Strategy. Their feedback helped us to understand what matters most to them - from feeling safe and supported to having inclusive learning environments.

While not every issue raised could be addressed immediately, we asked what we should focus on first. Their responses directly informed our priorities around inclusion, wellbeing, and being heard.

Other important areas, such as preparation for adulthood, remain a key part of our wider improvement work, but were not identified as immediate priorities for focus within this Strategy.

"We want to be valued, included, and involved in decisions about our learning and support."



What parents and carers told us

Parents and carers described a system that can both be supportive and challenging. While some praised the help their children received, many felt overwhelmed by the process of securing support.

Key themes from their feedback:

Navigating the system

Parents often feel the EHCP process is complex, slow, and difficult to navigate.

Emotional Impact

Families described feeling exhausted and unsupported, with siblings sometimes overlooked.

Access to services

Delays in diagnosis and limited post-diagnosis support were common concerns.

Communication and involvement

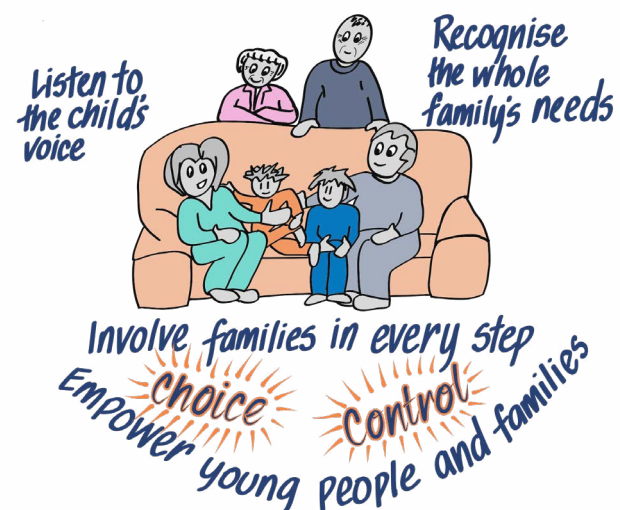
Parents want more empathetic, transparent communication and to be actively involved in decisions.

Provision gaps

There is a need for more inclusive and flexible provision, especially in early years, transitions, and post-25 support.

Employment and independence

Parents highlighted barriers to employment and independence for young people with SEND.



Parents and carers shared powerful insights into the challenges they face navigating the SEND system.

Their feedback highlighted the need for clearer communication, more joined up support and greater involvement in decision making.

We used this feedback to shape our priorities, focusing on improving how families are listened to, supported, and informed.

While some issues, such as post-25 support and sibling wellbeing were not included in the initial priorities, they remain important and will inform ongoing improvement work.

"Support should be easier to access, more joined-up, and centred around our child's needs and wellbeing"



What professionals told us

Professionals across education, health, and care shared their insights into the challenges and opportunities within the SEND system. Many expressed frustration at the pressures they face and the impact on children and families.

Key themes from their feedback:

Early identification and support

Delays in diagnosis and intervention can escalate needs unnecessarily.

Transitions and placements

Poorly managed transitions and unsuitable placements can lead to disengagement and distress.

Needs-led support

Professionals advocate for support based on individual needs, not just diagnosis.

Communication and collaboration

Better communication with families and joined up working across agencies are essential.

Workforce development

Training is needed to build confidence and capability, especially in mainstream settings.

Consistency and quality

Good practice exists but is not consistent across the county.



"We need a system that listens, responds, and equips us to support children and families effectively"

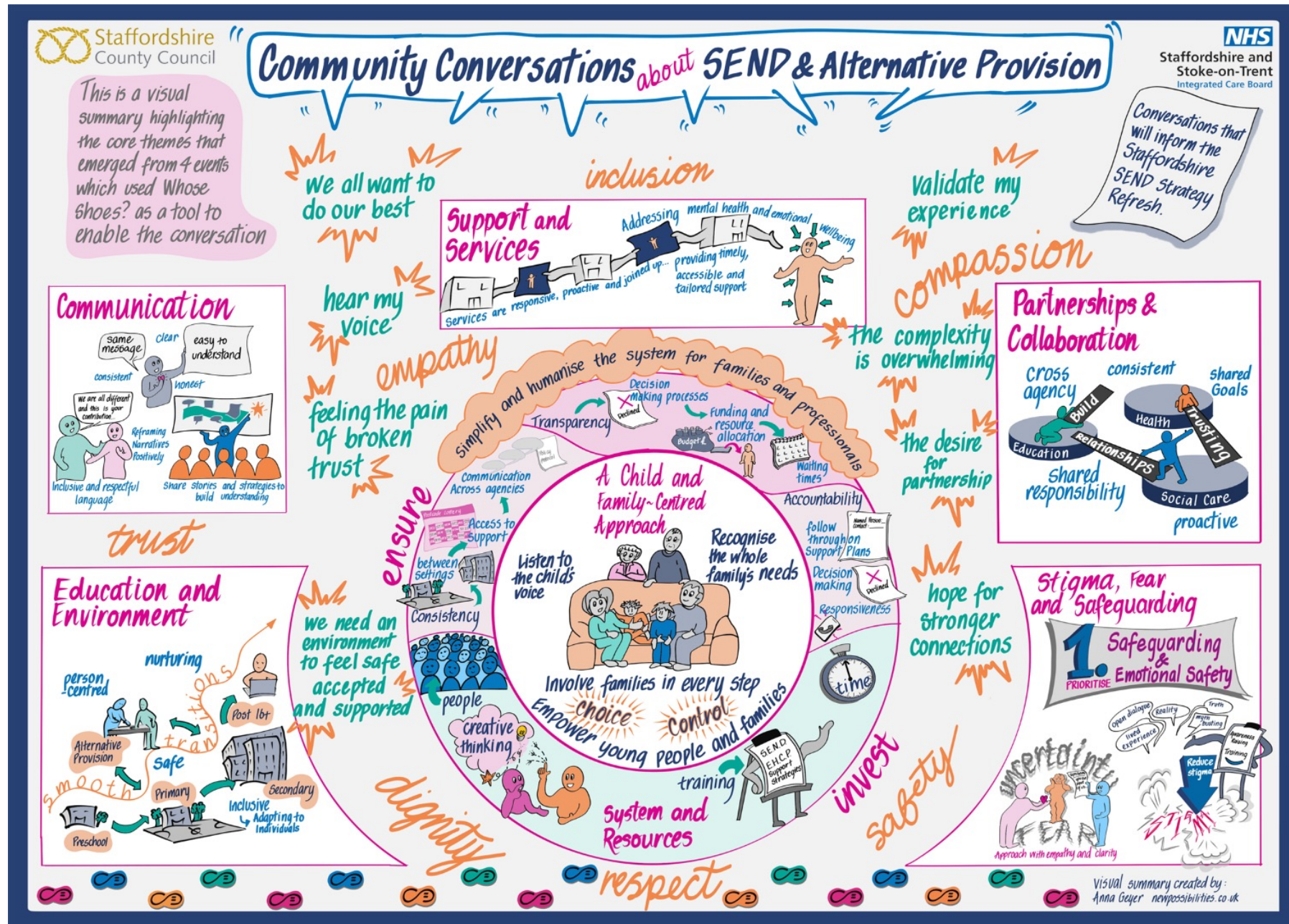
Professionals across education, health, and care helped us understand the pressures within the system and the opportunities for change.

Their feedback guided our focus on early identification, inclusive practice and workforce development.

We recognise that not all concerns could be addressed at once, and some areas like transitions and placement challenges, will be explored further through future planning and delivery.

The priorities in this Strategy reflect what professionals told us should be tackled first to make the biggest difference.





Community conversations

A mixture of young people, parents/carers, and professionals took part in our Community Conversations. They shared their experiences, challenges, and hopes for the future of SEND and alternative provision in Staffordshire.

The image alongside captures the key themes that emerged from these discussions.



Staffordshire SEND local area partnership priorities

This joint Strategy, developed by Staffordshire County Council and the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Integrated Care Board and our partners sets out our vision and the outcomes we want for our children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those who access alternative provision. It reflects our shared commitment across the local area partnership to improve experiences and outcomes.

Priority 1

The partnership will provide timely and consistent support

We will improve the timeliness and consistency of support by streamlining processes and strengthening early intervention pathways. Our focus is on ensuring children and young people receive the right support at the right time, with consistently positive experiences across Staffordshire.

Priority 2

The partnership will listen, understand and support families

We will embed co-production at every level and improve how we communicate with children, young people, and families. Our aim is to ensure people feel heard, valued, and supported, and that they are confident in navigating the SEND system.

Priority 3

The partnership will nurture inclusive environments and best practice

We will support professionals to access high-quality training, resources, and peer support, and promote inclusive, flexible, education environments that recognise and respond to individual needs. Our goal is to ensure every child and young person is well supported and can thrive.

Priority 1

The partnership will provide timely and consistent support

Outcome statement

Children and young people receive the right support at the right time, with consistently positive experiences across Staffordshire.

Our plan

We will improve the timeliness and consistency of support by streamlining processes and strengthening early intervention pathways across education, health and care. Our focus is ensuring that children and young people experience earlier, more coordinated and tailored support that helps them feel understood, included and able to thrive, not only in their learning, but in their overall development and wellbeing.

What impact looks like

Children and young people, their families and settings experience quicker access to more joined up support. They feel better understood and more confident in the system, with support that reflects their individual needs and helps them thrive.

How we'll make this happen

- Our focus will be on early intervention strategies to ensure we can provide earlier support to schools and settings to improve their graduated approach through our SEND and Inclusion model.
- We will implement a joined-up approach across the partnership by providing a continuum of support during the assessment process.
- We will strengthen our partnership's ability to deliver timely and consistent support by redesigning our statutory SEND processes to be child-centred and co-produced.



Priority 2

The partnership will listen, understand and support families

Outcome statement

Children, young people and families feel heard, valued, and involved in shaping their support and services. They feel better supported, informed, and confident in navigating the SEND system, including access to alternative provision services.

Our plan

We will continue to embed our Co-Production Promise at every level, from individual planning to strategic decision-making. We will improve how we communicate with children, young people and families - ensuring it is open, honest, timely and accessible. Our aim is to create a system where people feel genuinely listened to, where their experiences shape services, and where information is easy to find and understand.

What impact looks like

Children, young people and their families tell us they feel listened to and that their views, wishes, and aspirations are clearly understood and valued. Families report feeling more confident, less overwhelmed, and better supported throughout their journey.

How we'll make this happen

- We will improve our Local Offer by working with the partnership to redesign its structure and content, ensuring it is clear, accessible, and user-friendly. This will include simplifying navigation, updating key service information, and adding more lived experience content.
- We will further embed and improve our co-production principles and practice across the partnership by delivering targeted training, developing tools for professionals, and expanding opportunities for families to be involved in decision making, service design and review.
- We will strengthen how we capture and use lived experience feedback to improve services by introducing consistent feedback mechanisms across services and ensuring that insights are regularly reviewed and acted upon through our governance structures.



Priority 3

The partnership will nurture inclusive environments and best practice

Outcome statement

Professionals working with children and young people feel confident and well-equipped to support those with additional needs.

Education, health, and care settings are encouraged and supported to be inclusive, flexible and responsive to individual strengths and challenges.

Our plan

We will support professionals across education, health, and care to access high quality training, resources, and peer support focused on inclusive, practical strategies.

Our aim is to support settings to foster environments where children and young people with SEND feel understood, supported, and able to thrive - with staff who are confident in identifying needs and tailoring support effectively.

What impact looks like

Children and young people experience more inclusive and supportive environments. They report feeling safe, understood, and able to engage in learning and development. Professionals report increased confidence and capability in meeting diverse needs, and settings demonstrate improved inclusive practice.

How we'll make this happen

- We will develop and promote a suite of training materials and resources for professionals, accessible through our Local Offer. These will include practical tools, case studies, and guidance to support inclusive practice.
- We will strengthen Staffordshire's Whole School SEND programme by increasing the number of schools engaging with training, self-assessment, and peer review.
- We will work with settings to explore and define what inclusive practice looks like and identify opportunities to share and embed best practice across the partnership.



Our commitment to alternative provision

While most children and young people are supported in their mainstream settings, we recognise that for some, alternative provision plays a vital role in meeting their needs and enabling them to thrive.

Why alternative provision matters

Alternative provision is a vital part of Staffordshire's inclusive education system. It offers flexible, tailored support for children and young people who are not in full-time mainstream education, as well as those who benefit from accessing alternative provision alongside their school placement.

Alternative provision can be a proactive and preventative approach, helping to meet a wide range of needs through high-quality, responsive provision.

What we're doing

We are strengthening our approach to alternative provision by:

- Embedding early intervention strategies that help schools identify needs sooner and enable children and young people to access targeted support before issues escalate.
- Improving oversight and coordination of alternative provision placements, with a focus on reintegration planning and joined up working across education, health and care.

- Investing in inclusive practice and innovation, including digital solutions that support continuity of learning and reduce isolation.
- Enhancing quality assurance and outcome tracking, ensuring every alternative provision placement is purposeful and focused on helping children thrive.

Our strategic focus

- Embed alternative provision within our inclusive education system - providing a tailored solution to meet individual needs.
- Ensure alternative provision is purposeful and focused on reintegration or progression.
- Continue to co-produce alternative provision services with children, young people, families, and professionals.
- Develop our sufficiency planning - to guide future commissioning and ensure we meet rising demand.



How we will monitor delivery

We will co-produce a dynamic delivery plan that sets out the key activities, milestones, and responsibilities across the lifetime of this Strategy. The plan will be regularly reviewed and adapted in response to emerging needs, priorities, and national developments - ensuring that our actions remain relevant, effective, and focused on improving outcomes for children and young people.

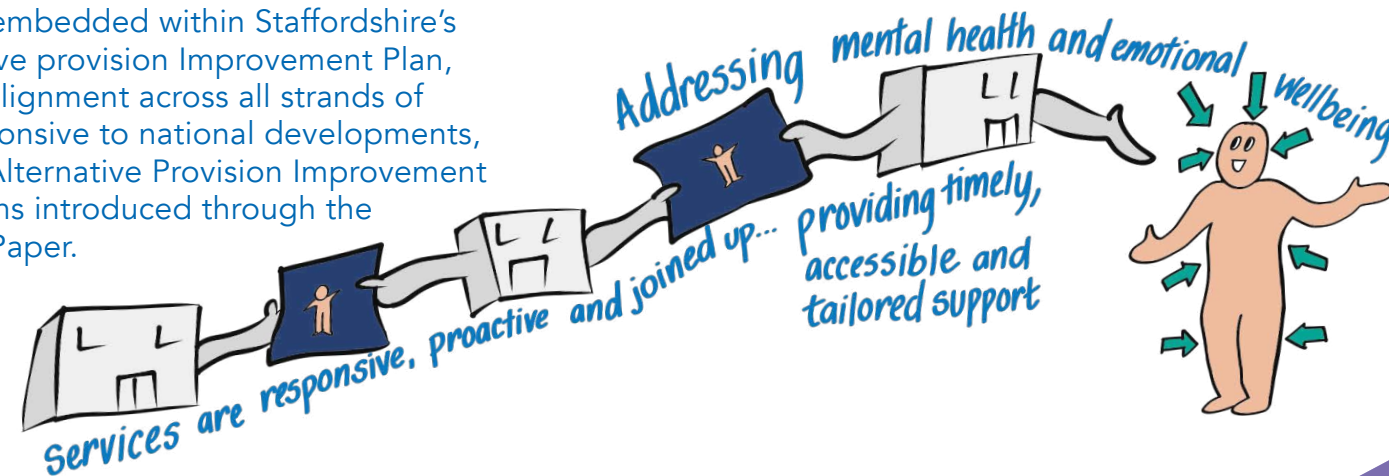
Oversight and accountability will be provided by the SEND and Inclusion Partnership Group, which will lead implementation and monitor progress. This group will ensure that delivery remains aligned with our shared vision and values, and that partners are held to account for their contributions.

Progress will be reported to the SEND Strategic Effectiveness Board, providing transparent oversight across the local area partnership. This will include regular updates on what's working, where the challenges remain, and how feedback is being used to drive improvement.

The delivery plan will be embedded within Staffordshire's wider SEND and alternative provision Improvement Plan, ensuring coherence and alignment across all strands of work. We will remain responsive to national developments, including the SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan and any future reforms introduced through the anticipated SEND White Paper.

We will also consider the implications of local government reorganisation, ensuring our approach remains aligned with emerging structures and responsibilities.

Importantly, we will use feedback from children, young people, families and professionals to inform ongoing delivery - ensuring that lived experience continues to shape and strengthen our approach, and that the Strategy remains focused on what matters most to them.



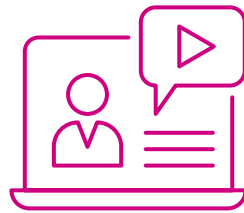
Our approach

To achieve the priorities and outcomes set out in this Strategy, we will:



Empower our workforce

Provide targeted training, coaching, and peer support to professionals across education, health and care - helping them to feel confident and equipped to identify needs early, respond effectively, and champion inclusive practice.



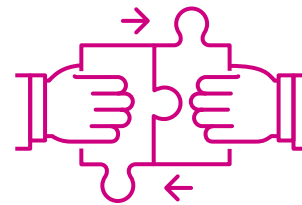
Use technology to improve access and coordination

Harness digital solutions to streamline processes, improve access to information, and enhance communication between families and professionals - supporting more joined-up and responsive services.



Co-produce support and services

Work with children, young people, families and professionals to design and deliver support that reflects lived experience, meets local needs, and promotes inclusion and equity.



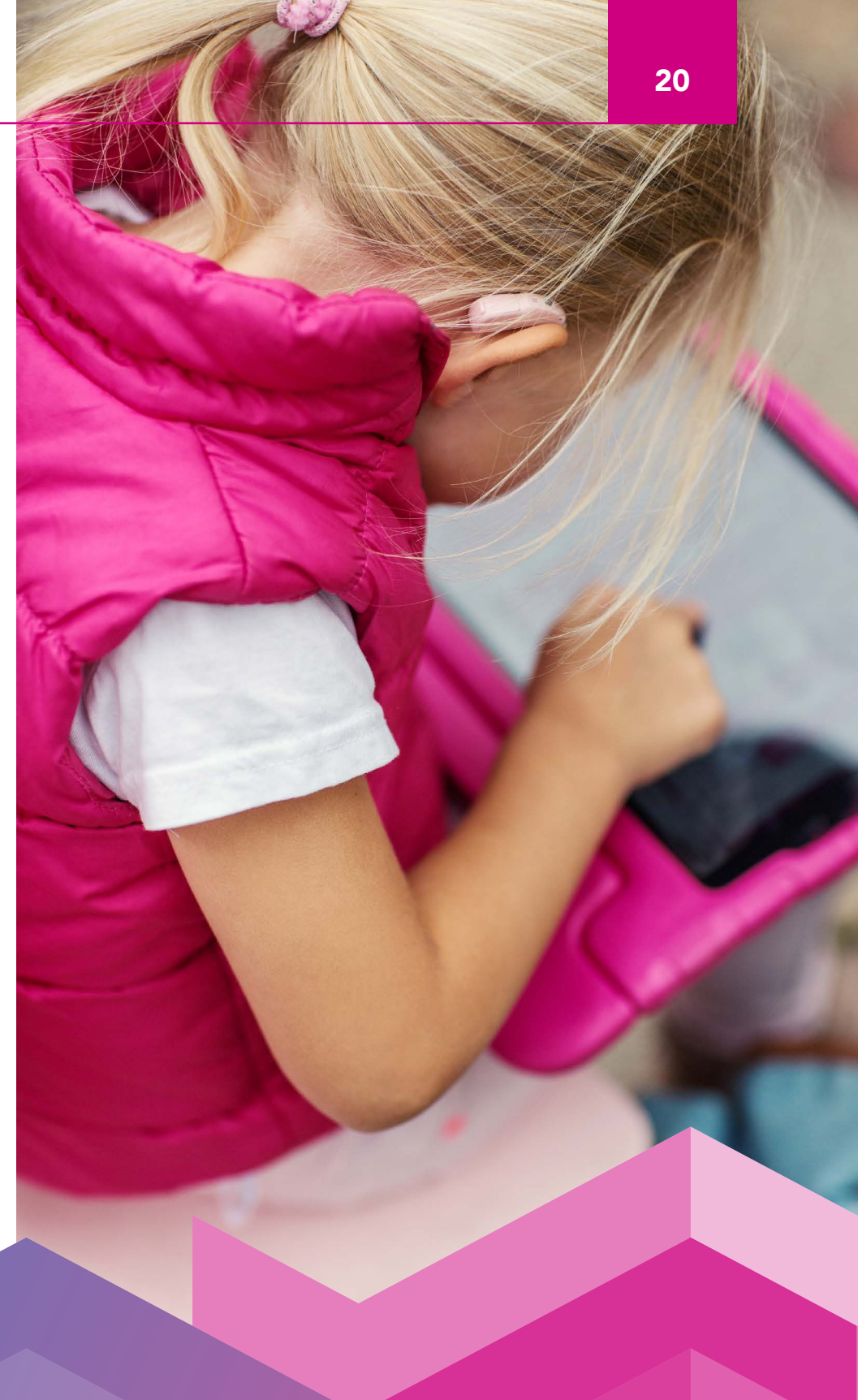
Strengthen partnership working

Build on existing strengths across the SEND local area partnership by aligning resources, sharing expertise, and fostering collaboration to improve outcomes for children and young people.



Put children, young people and families at the heart of everything we do

Ensure that the voices, experiences and aspirations of children, young people and their families shape every aspect of our work - from strategic planning to day-to-day support.



Future planning and risk management

We recognise that delivering this Strategy will require ongoing adaptability and resilience. The SEND system continues to face challenges, including rising demand, workforce pressures, and financial constraints.

To remain sustainable and responsive, we will:

- Monitor emerging risks such as capacity within services, recruitment and retention of skilled professionals, and the impact of national reforms.
- Plan proactively by aligning our delivery plan with available resources, and by using data and feedback to anticipate and respond to changing needs.
- Remain flexible in our approach, adapting as necessary to reflect local government reorganisation, changes within the ICB and national developments, including the SEND

and alternative provision Improvement Plan and any future reforms introduced through the anticipated SEND White Paper.

- Manage risks and issues through Staffordshire's SEND and alternative provision Improvement Plan and our existing governance structures, ensuring that challenges are addressed collaboratively and transparently across the partnership.

This approach will help ensure that the Strategy remains deliverable, equitable, and focused on improving outcomes for children and young people over time.





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