# Effective Practice case study: Southampton SEND mainstream funding cluster model

## Summary

In September 2025, Southampton City Council (SCC) launched its SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) Mainstream Funding Cluster Model across all 66 mainstream settings within the City. The model brings together primary and secondary schools with local professionals. These include Educational Psychologists (EPs), the Neurodiversity Multidisciplinary Team (NDMDT) and health colleagues. Together they provide flexible, rapid support for pupils with SEND. By devolving £1 million from the High Needs Block (HNB) to eight locality-based clusters, the model has placed increased emphasis on early intervention and collective responsibility, alongside statutory processes focused on individual support. Since its introduction, the model has fostered a culture of trust and professional collaboration across the City, supporting earlier needs-led support in mainstream settings. Funding is used as an enabler of collaboration rather than as the primary driver of support.

The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the "strength of evidence" of this case study is **emerging.** The work has been evaluated internally after its first full year, capturing feedback from practitioners alongside impact monitoring of funded projects and interventions. The work is now entering its second full year of deployment, following the initial pilot phase. The "breadth of impact" of this case study is **promising.** There is evidence of impact in terms of feedback from professionals and education, health and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people[1].




## Why was this work undertaken? What did the work aim to do?

In 2022, SCC commissioned an independent review of SEND funding and support. The review highlighted a significant cumulative deficit in the High Needs budget and substantial growth in the total number of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) from

[1] The SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework uses two "signal strength" indicators to present the strength of evidence and the breadth of impact of a case study. Each indicator has four bars – emerging, promising, good and robust The "strength of evidence" indicator is based on how the project has been evaluated and the length of time it has been sustained. The "breadth of impact" indicator is based on whether the case study can demonstrate impact in four broad areas – the more areas of impact, the higher the signal strength indicator.

803 in 2015 to 1,938 by 2022, which was above the national trend. There was also evidence of variability in inclusive practice and thresholds for support between schools.

Following the review, a task-and-finish group was established in June 2023 to design a cluster-based model. To ensure system-wide buy-in, the Local Authority (LA) coordinated an extended co-production period, offering every school and trust in Southampton an individual meeting to discuss the proposed model. This journey from conception to launch included a voluntary pilot in the spring and summer terms of 2025, allowing settings to trial the referral system and build relationships before funding was attached.

The Southampton cluster model has three primary aims:

- **To improve support and outcomes for pupils with SEND** through early intervention and more timely access to resources
- **To provide flexible access to High Needs funding** that allows schools to support individual pupils and groups, or undertake wider project-based work, alongside the statutory EHCP process
- **To foster professional collaboration and peer support**, creating a 'team around the cluster' that reduces professional isolation for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and builds leadership skills

The statutory EHCP framework remains available for children and young people whose needs require this level of support.

# What were the key actions and practices involved?

The SCC model organises all 66 mainstream settings into 8 cross-phase, geographically proximate locality clusters. By bringing together schools from different Academy Trusts, alongside LA-maintained settings, these clusters focus strictly on local communities and support smooth transitions between secondary schools and their primary feeders. The cluster groupings ensure similar pupil population sizes to enable equitable funding distribution and economies of scale across diverse school types.

Each cluster is supported by a Locality Lead, employed by the LA, to coordinate support across schools and partner agencies. Locality Leads chair half-termly meetings of a multi-professional group, including SENCOs from all member schools. At these meetings, the cluster considers requests to access devolved HNB funding, submitted by schools in advance, as well as facilitating problem-solving discussion with peers and supporting specialists. A Steering Group monitors City-wide spending trends, reviews cluster budgets and ensures alignment with strategic SEND priorities.

## Roles, leadership, and the 'team around the cluster'

Although Southampton originally considered having SENCOs chair cluster meetings, school feedback during the co-production period led to the decision that LA-based Locality Leads should chair. The Locality Leads coordinate between clusters, ensure

consistency in applying the graduated approach, and link local discussions to City-wide strategic priorities.

To build a comprehensive 'team around the cluster' each half-termly meeting is attended by a multi-professional group. This includes:

- SENCOs or inclusion representatives from each member school
- The Locality Lead (chairing the meeting)
- Two rotating EPs who provide early intervention advice
- Members of the Southampton NDMDT
- Representatives from the Southampton Parent Carer Forum (PCF), who visit and support some cluster meetings

## The four funding and discussion routes

Schools can engage with their cluster and access devolved HNB funding through three distinct pathways:

1. **Individual funding requests**: short-term funding requests targeting a specific pupil's immediate needs
2. **Group funding requests**: short-term funding designed to support a group of pupils collectively
3. **Project-based requests**: long-term funding for wider, systemic project-based work within an individual school or as part of a collaborative bid across multiple schools

Alongside these funded support routes, schools can also access a fourth, non-funded pathway: solution-focused discussions. Under this route SENCOs can bring complex cases to the cluster meeting for a brief, five-minute problem-solving discussion with peers and supporting specialists such as EPs or members of the NDMDT, without requesting funding.

The presence of this fourth support route reinforces the principle that while funding is an important enabler, the model's greatest strength lies in the quality of professional dialogue, shared problem-solving and collaborative practice within each cluster.

## Standardised referral paperwork

To minimise administrative burdens for SENCOs, Southampton has co-produced short, simplified and standardised digital forms to submit requests for support:

- **SEND Profile of Need**: Completed for solution-focused, individual and group requests. SENCOs score the pupil's presentation across four broad areas of need, generating a consistent, evidence-informed one-page summary. The case overview is strictly limited to 250 words, emphasising a concise, objective account of need.

- **Costed Provision Map**: This digital form automates budget calculations. It applies standardised hourly rates for four core support staff roles – including Teaching Assistants. If a custom role like an external alternative provision or therapist is required, the SENCO manually inputs the cost.

- **Project-Based Referral Form**: In addition to standard questions outlining the project's aims, delivery, and expected impact (each limited to 250 words), SCC added two critical questions following the initial pilot: *"How could this project support other settings in the cluster group?"* and *"How can you ensure that the project is going to be sustainable?"*.

## Systems and decision-making processes

Half-day cluster meetings are supported by a range of systems and decision-making processes to ensure they are adequately structured and focused, and that decisions are made from a position of impartiality:

- **Preparatory work**: Locality Leads compile and circulate bids for pre-reading. SENCOs review the bids beforehand and record their screening decision ("Yes", "No – need more info", or "No – alternative suggestion given"). This preparatory work allows the cluster to bypass lengthy debates on clear-cut cases and allocate more time to complex discussions.

- **Collective decision-making**: Locality Leads present submitted bids so that schools do not have to pitch their own submissions to their peers. The cluster then splits into small discussion groups of three (typically two schools and one supporting professional) to evaluate cases collaboratively and feedback as a collective. Schools unanimously chose not to anonymise submissions, as knowing the local context is crucial for understanding a school's needs and existing approaches.

- **Co-design**: When a bid is not agreed, the cluster can advise a school how its submitted proposal could be developed and strengthened. Schools can also receive specialist support from the cluster to pilot and refine a new approach, in order to show proof of concept before resubmitting a request for support.

- **Rapid resource allocation**: Agreed funding is actioned by finance on the Friday immediately after a cluster meeting. For individual pupil bids, the funding is split across terms and travels with the child if they move to a different setting, ensuring seamless support.

## Quality assurance

SCC implements a robust, three-part quality assurance (QA) framework to ensure devolved funding strengthens inclusive practice across its mainstream school system:

1. **Strategic oversight**: A Steering Group meets termly, comprising representatives from the LA, school leaders, governors, the PCF, the voluntary sector and children's social care. The group monitors City-wide spending trends, reviews overall cluster budgets (such as tracking end-of-year surpluses), analyses feedback and ensures alignment with the strategic priorities established by the local area partnership.

2. **Impact monitoring**: Locality Leads conduct in-person visits to schools to review how funding is being deployed and assess pupil outcomes. Outcomes are monitored using both quantitative and qualitative data, including pre- and post-intervention indicators such as attendance and suspension rates. Individual and group bids are reviewed upon completion, while project-based initiatives are reviewed after two terms of implementation.

3. **Self- and peer-evaluation**: SCC's mainstream funding cluster model aims to strengthen inclusive cultures and practices City-wide. Schools use the Inclusive Education Audit self-evaluation tool to design whole-school action plans. Additionally, Southampton is piloting the Global Equality Collective (GEC) Tool across 18 settings to gather annual qualitative feedback from staff, learners, and parents on the inclusivity of settings' environments.

# What has been the impact?




The Southampton SEND mainstream funding cluster model is able to demonstrate impact in two of the four areas captured by the SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework, through internal evaluation reports, impact monitoring of funded projects and interventions, and system-level administrative data.

While the introduction of the mainstream funding cluster model has been accompanied by a slowing in the rate of year-on-year EHCP growth in Southampton (from 15.2% in 2024 to 5.7% in 2025, against a backdrop of accelerating growth nationally), this was never the primary aim of the work. The statutory EHCP framework remains available for children and young people whose needs require this level of support.

An end of financial year feedback form for 2025–26 gathered responses from 41 SENCOs and 20 Headteachers in the City. 70% of respondents rated the model as "very effective" (rising to 83% among SENCOs). SENCOs reported that they "no longer feel alone" and value the opportunity to seek advice from peers and experts. One professional described the model as "the best thing we have had from the LA in a long time."

The model has helped to shift schools' default response to meeting pupils' needs away from individual funding requests. In the pilot year, 74% of agreed bids were for project-based work – such as early language identification and staff training – rather than support attached to individual pupils. Groups of schools are now beginning to work together to design systemic solutions for challenges like Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), rather than purchasing high-cost individual alternative provision.

At the end of the 2025/26 financial year all eight Southampton clusters had an unspent surplus ranging from 4% to 20%, resulting in a City-wide underspend of £102,860 (12% of the total devolved budget). The surplus was reinvested in four inclusion initiatives designed to solidify inclusive practice across the City: EBSNA support; alternative pathway training and support; inclusive creative arts workshops, and specialist sensory and physical impairment training for all maintained settings.

## How has the work been sustained?

The model is now an established feature of the SEND system in Southampton and provides a foundation for implementing core elements of the current national reforms, such as the Experts at Hand service. The LA plans to extend the cluster model to include early years and post-16 settings, ensuring a consistent approach to meeting needs across all phases. The first full year of delivery suggests the model is financially sustainable.




## Finding out more

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| **Useful resources and links** | Southampton SEND Local Offer - Cluster Model Webpage<br><br>Introduction for Parents, Carers, and Young People (Video) |