

Building confidence in SEND funding- decisions through a phased approach.

SEND CASE STUDY

Rather than waiting for reform, Sheffield City Council started small and built confidence in SEND decision-making across the city.

Context

In late 2023, Sheffield City Council was reviewing its SEND system against a backdrop of rising demand, pressure on statutory processes, and uncertainty about the future direction of national SEND reform.

Senior leaders wanted to improve consistency, transparency and confidence within their existing system. However, like many councils, they were cautious about committing to large-scale change without first understanding how their current system was performing in practice.

Rather than pause activity or wait for reform, the local authority chose a phased approach, starting small, building understanding, and allowing confidence to grow before making longer-term decisions.

PRESSURES IN VIEW



Rising demand



Pressure on statutory processes



Uncertainty over SEND reform

Rather than pause activity or wait for reform, the local authority chose a phased approach.

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PHASE 1

Starting with understanding through real use cases

The first phase focused on developing a clearer understanding of the council's existing SEND cohort and how decisions were being made in practice.

Rather than introducing immediate change, the team used structured tools to review EHCPs across a range of ages, needs and settings. This helped surface patterns, highlight variation between similar cases, and improve how needs were described and understood.

At this stage, the focus was not on changing funding approaches or implementing new models. It was about learning from real cases, testing understanding, and building confidence through practical use.

REVIEWING EHCPs ACROSS...



Ages



Needs



Settings

What this enabled

This initial phase gave Sheffield City Council a clearer and more confident understanding of the funding requirements for its mainstream SEND system.

It enabled the team to:



Build a clearer view of the mainstream SEND cohort

Moving beyond individual cases to understand patterns across needs, provision and settings.



Identify variation across similar cases

Highlighting where decisions differed and creating a starting point for more consistent approaches.



Develop a stronger evidence base

Providing insight to inform internal reviews, planning, and future decision-making.

This moved funding conversations away from individual cases in isolation, towards a more joined-up understanding of how the system was operating as a whole.

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PHASE 2

Scaling use in a controlled, low-risk way

As confidence grew, Sheffield City Council began extending use of the tools in live practice – not through a single rollout, but through controlled, incremental use.

This allowed teams to build on their understanding while maintaining oversight and assurance. Use was introduced in stages, with teams:



Testing outputs alongside professional judgement



Reflecting on insights through ongoing discussion



Introducing use gradually across cohorts and settings

Rather than forcing change, insights were integrated into existing processes such as panels and reviews. This helped strengthen decision-making without disrupting established ways of working.



Overall, this approach ensured that learning was embedded into day-to-day practice, while giving leaders confidence that changes were proportionate, controlled and aligned with governance requirements.

Building confidence through real use

Over time, the impact of this phased approach became clear.

Leaders had a stronger understanding of trends and funding pressures across the system. Allocation became more consistent, and conversations about funding – both internally and externally – became easier to navigate and explain.

This change didn't happen through a single change, but through the gradual accumulation of insight, experience and confidence.

When the Council came to review its longer-term options, it did so from a position of practical understanding rather than uncertainty. Having used the tools in real cases and seen their value over time, the decision to formalise the relationship, committing to a longer-term contract, felt like a natural next step.

This resulted in:



Clearer
understanding of
system pressures



More consistent
and explainable
decisions



Greater
confidence across
teams



We were conscious of the uncertainty around SEND reform and didn't want to make commitments we couldn't stand behind. What worked for us was starting small and taking partners with us – using the tools to properly understand our cohort and what our data was telling us.

Over time, that built real confidence in the system across the city. Conversations that had previously been difficult became easier to have, and decision-making felt more consistent and defensible. By the time we came to think about a longer-term commitment, it felt like a natural next step rather than a leap of faith.

SEND Lead

Sheffield City Council

What this approach offers other councils

This case demonstrates that progress during periods of uncertainty does not require immediate large-scale change.

By starting with understanding, learning through real use, and expanding only as confidence grows, Sheffield City Council strengthened the foundations of its SEND system in a way that was proportionate, controlled and aligned with its governance responsibilities.

For councils facing similar uncertainty, it offers a practical starting point:

01 Begin with understanding, not transformation

02 Use real cases to build insight and confidence

03 Expand gradually, embedding learning into practice

This approach allows meaningful progress without needing to commit to the full journey upfront.



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