

Actionable Steps: Preparing Your School for Impact

Here are some preparatory steps for School Leaders and Mental Health Professionals over the next 12 months, specifically for the impact of expanded FSM and anticipated SEND reforms:

Actionable Steps for FSM Expansion and Child Poverty Measures 🍎

The expansion of Free School Meal eligibility and breakfast clubs presents a vital opportunity to proactively support mental health by mitigating the adverse effects of poverty.

1. Data, Funding, and Resource Planning

- **Model FSM Uptake:** Work closely with the **School Business Manager** (SBM) to accurately project the increase in **FSM-eligible pupils**. Assess the impact on catering logistics and dining capacity to ensure the school can manage the higher volume of pupils eating free meals with efficiency and dignity.
- **Calculate Pupil Premium (PP) Projection:** The new FSM figures will directly influence your **Pupil Premium funding allocation** for future academic years. Immediately utilise this forecast to **ring-fence PP funding** for evidence-based interventions targeting well-being, attendance, and the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils.
- **Evaluate Breakfast Club Feasibility:** As the free breakfast club rollout begins its first phase, conduct a full review of your premises. Plan for staffing, space allocation, and how the club environment can be used to promote a **calm, nurturing transition** into the school day, supporting pupil well-being from the outset.

2. Mental Health Integration and Dignity

- **Embed Poverty-Aware Practice:** Deliver essential training to all staff (including support and administrative teams) on **poverty-aware and trauma-informed practice**. Staff must understand how financial stress

and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can manifest as behaviour or attendance issues, requiring compassionate, not punitive, responses.

- **Ensure Discreet Processes:** Review all school systems—from online payment platforms to administrative checks—to guarantee that the identification and provision of FSM is **completely discreet**. Preventing stigma is paramount to protecting the self-esteem and mental health of vulnerable pupils.
- **Maximise Uniform Reform:** Proactively implement the new legislation on school uniform costs by significantly **reducing the number of required branded items**. Communicate the policy changes early to parents to alleviate financial anxiety and reinforce the school's commitment to inclusivity.

Actionable Steps for Anticipated SEND Reform Plans 🧠

While the full details of the **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reform** will be published early in the new year, proactive management and preparation are critical.

1. Provision Audit and Investment

- **Conduct a Comprehensive SEND Audit:** The **SENCo** (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) should lead an internal audit of current SEND provision, focusing on intervention efficacy, resource utilisation, and actual costs. **Quantify the demand vs. resource gap** to inform future planning and discussions with the **Local Authority (LA)**.
- **Prioritise Early Intervention (Tiers 1 & 2):** In anticipation of reforms focused on a more sustainable system, increase investment in **universal and targeted mental health interventions**. This reduces the number of pupils requiring expensive, high-level specialist support, making the system more efficient and better for pupil outcomes.
- **Review Internal Alternative Provision (AP):** Scrutinise how in-house AP (such as inclusion units or designated support spaces) operates. Ensure the focus is on **re-engagement and therapeutic support**, rather than purely exclusion or behaviour management, particularly for pupils whose needs are intertwined with mental health and neurodiversity.

2. Professional Development and Collaboration

- **Joint SENCo/MHL Training:** Schedule mandatory training sessions led jointly by the SENCo and Mental Health Lead. This should focus on the crucial **overlap between neurodiversity (e.g., Autism, ADHD) and common mental health issues** (e.g., anxiety, school refusal), ensuring staff can identify underlying needs accurately.
- **Strengthen External Links:** Anticipate a need for schools to take more direct control over commissioning services. **Strengthen established links** with local **CYPMHS** (Children and Young People's Mental Health Services) and reputable third-sector providers to ensure seamless, accessible referral and support pathways for pupils with complex needs.
- **Focus on Staff Well-being:** Recognise the heightened pressures on pastoral, SEND, and teaching staff during a period of reform. Implement and adequately **budget for a robust staff well-being strategy** to maintain a resilient workforce capable of delivering high-quality, emotionally intelligent support to the school's most vulnerable children.