

SEND reform national conversation

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3. Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

4. Which of the following best describes the capacity in which you are responding?

Charity or non-governmental organisation

5. How can we identify children's and young people's needs as early as possible?

Local authorities must fully uphold their legal duties under the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice. Delays, poor-quality assessments, and lack of timely support often result in needs being missed or escalating unnecessarily.

Early identification should actively involve children and young people, listening to their views and experiences. It also requires collaboration between families, health services, and educational settings, using observations and evidence-based tools.

Current delays in EHC plan processing are driven by severe capacity issues. EHCP coordinators often manage caseloads of 400+ families, limiting meaningful communication with parents. A national shortage of educational psychologists further delays assessments, with some local authorities temporarily using costly private services - an unsustainable approach that increases inconsistency.

To improve early identification, investment is needed across the system. Smaller EHCP caseloads would allow EHCP coordinators to communicate effectively with families and schools, and greater recruitment, training, and funding for educational psychologists are essential to meet statutory assessment requirements.

6. Children and young people's needs change over time. How can we ensure children and young people get support quickly without needing a diagnosis?

Children and young people must be able to access support based on identified needs, not delayed until a formal diagnosis or EHCP. Flexible, interim support should complement - not replace - EHCPs, ensuring children are helped while assessments are ongoing or delayed, preventing needs from escalating.

Schools and local authorities need the capacity and resources to respond quickly as needs change. Years of funding cuts have reduced schools' ability to provide early SEND support, while overstretched local authorities struggle to complete assessments promptly. Sustainable funding and clearer support structures are essential to provide timely help.

SENDAIASS plays a vital role in helping families understand rights, navigate systems, and access support early, yet services are often under-resourced. Adequate funding and independence are critical to provide impartial, trusted guidance, strengthen accountability, and safeguard families' access to unbiased support at every stage of the process.

7. What would help early years, school and college staff put support in place quickly when they identify a child has SEN?

Staff need the capacity, confidence, and resources to act as soon as needs are identified. Based on feedback from colleagues in our services, currently, schools are expected to provide extensive SEND support and evidence before an EHCP application can progress. Without sufficient funding, training, and specialist input, this expectation creates delays and places unnecessary pressure on settings, slowing down access to support for children and young people.

Schools also need clearer guidance, practical tools, and specialist support to gather SEND evidence without delay, allowing needs to be identified and responded to earlier.

Finally, children and young people must have access to a genuine continuum of provision, including specialist settings where appropriate. Without suitable options available, even early identification does not translate into timely or effective support.

8. How should we record and review a child or young person's needs and the support they need?

9. The Disabled Children's Partnership recommends all children with SEND should have a written record of the support they need. Do you agree? What are the pros and cons of this?

We agree with the Disabled Children's Partnership. A written record for all children with SEND would support earlier intervention, consistency, and accountability, particularly for those whose needs do not meet the threshold for an EHCP but still require support.

A written record would enable needs-led support without waiting for diagnosis or statutory thresholds, helping staff act quickly and preventing needs from escalating. It would give families clarity about what support should be in place, reduce conflict, and improve continuity during transitions. It would also support better coordination between education, health, and social care, and help monitor whether support is delivered and adapted over time.

There is a risk that written records become a bureaucratic exercise or are used as a substitute for EHCPs. Without clear standards, training, and additional capacity, implementation could be inconsistent and increase pressure on schools and local authorities. A written record has clear benefits if it complements, not replaces EHCPs, is regularly reviewed, and is supported by adequate funding, workforce capacity, and accountability.

16. The Education Select Committee suggests designating some high-quality specialist schools as 'Centres of Excellence' to share good practice. What do you think about this?

17. How can specialist schools and colleges and mainstream schools and colleges work together to support children?

18. Do you have any other comments?

As a specialist education, care, and support charity with 156 years of experience, we know that specialist education settings are vital for neurodiverse students whose needs cannot be fully met in mainstream schools. Mainstream environments often lack the tailored support required for students with sensory sensitivities, communication difficulties, or social challenges. Pressuring more students into mainstream settings risks worsening outcomes for those who need structured, specialist provision.

Our specialist school supports neurodiverse students who, despite working at age-related academic levels, face challenges such as communication difficulties, sensory processing issues, and severe anxiety. Many have complex disabilities that may not be immediately visible but significantly affect their wellbeing and learning.

Local authorities often resist funding specialist placements, assuming academic ability alone justifies mainstream schooling. This overlooks underlying needs, leading to inadequate support, worsened mental health, increased school avoidance, and social isolation. Addressing these needs is essential for improving wellbeing, educational outcomes, and long-term employability.

Recommendations:

- Increase investment in specialist education settings tailored to neurodivergent students.
- Adopt a nuanced approach recognising varied and complex needs, prioritising early support for students with high sensory, communication, or social needs to prevent escalation of mental health issues and disengagement.
- Base funding decisions on individual needs rather than budget constraints to ensure every child receives the support required to thrive.

19. What support should every school routinely offer to children with SEND?

The DfE should implement a comprehensive strategy to ensure that all schools are equipped to meet the evolving needs of students with SEND. Inclusive practices should be embedded as standard, rather than relying on reactive measures or individual requests for support.

Every school should be systematically prepared to accommodate a wide range of needs - including sensory, communication, social, and mental health challenges - as part of routine provision. This includes providing trained staff, flexible learning approaches, and tailored interventions that prevent difficulties from escalating and promote wellbeing, engagement, and achievement for all students with SEND.

By normalising inclusive practices across the school system, children can be supported early, barriers to learning reduced, and equitable opportunities created for every student to thrive.

22. How can we make sure children and young people get the same high-quality support wherever they live in the country?

23. Do you have any other comments?

Funding for SEND should be allocated based on the individual needs of children and young people, rather than local authority budgets, to eliminate postcode lotteries and ensure equitable support across all regions.

SEND service information should be centralised and simplified, providing clear, accessible, and user-friendly resources for all families to navigate support effectively.

Collaboration between local authorities and educational settings should be actively encouraged, enabling the sharing and implementation of best practices nationwide to improve outcomes and consistency of provision for children and young people with SEND.

25. What changes do you think are required to support and enhance the role of SENCOs in education settings?

Our community services colleagues highlighted the need to strengthen the SENCO role. Currently, many SENCOs are stretched across multiple schools, limiting their capacity to provide consistent guidance and timely intervention. To meet statutory duties and support children effectively as needs emerge or change, SENCOs should have dedicated, full-time positions with adequate time, training, and resources.

29. What does good join-up across local services look like?

Good join-up requires consistent participation from all relevant agencies in EHCP reviews, regardless of the young person's perceived progress, ensuring full adherence to statutory responsibilities outlined in the SEND Code of Practice. Collaboration between local authorities and educational settings should be actively encouraged to share and implement best practices nationwide, improving consistency and quality of provision.

Effective transition planning should begin early, with close coordination between children's and adult services. This ensures tailored support for each individual, as well as efficient allocation of resources at both local and national levels.

30. What are the main barriers stopping services from working well together?

A primary barrier is the lack of adequate funding across all relevant agencies - education, health, and social care - which limits their ability to fulfil responsibilities within the EHCP process.

Evidence from our education staff highlights that many agencies are not meaningfully involved in EHCP development or reviews. This delays early intervention, leaving young people without adequate support and restricting their ability to engage with their communities or access essential services.

Local authorities, which hold responsibility for EHCPs, often fail to update plans or attend review meetings unless there are significant transitions, such as moving between key stages or into adulthood. Even in these cases, attendance is inconsistent, particularly when a young person is perceived as "doing well". This lack of ongoing engagement sends a clear message that the continuing needs of young people are not prioritised.

Additionally, when LAs seek to cease an EHCP, families and young people are often pressured to rely solely on social care. This approach overlooks the full spectrum of needs across education, health, and social care, further undermining wellbeing and long-term prospects for the young person.

32. What would good independent advocacy look like, both in mediation services and in other areas of SEND resolution?

Good independent advocacy should be offered through an '**active offer**', rather than an opt-out model, ensuring that children and young people with SEND - and their families - are consistently made aware of the availability of advocacy support. Advocacy services should facilitate access to key resources, including SENDIASS and therapeutic support, and be available to those without an EHC plan. Support should also extend across key transition points, such as starting or leaving school, post-16 pathways, and supported internships.

Mediation services should be adequately funded and staffed. They should be strengthened as a **preventative tool** to resolve disputes before they escalate to SEND tribunals, saving time and resources for local authorities while providing families with a supportive, accessible space - whether face-to-face or virtual - for discussion. Effective mediation not only prevents tribunal cases but also improves relationships, fosters collaboration, and helps achieve mutually beneficial resolutions.

33. How can early years, schools, colleges, and employers work together to support children as they move through different stages of education?

Effective transitions require early, coordinated planning with all partners - including children, young people, and their families - actively involved. This approach reduces fear of the future and increases confidence for both young people and their parents/carers.

Evidence from our *What Comes After Education for Young Disabled People* survey highlights the importance of involving young people in planning to achieve positive outcomes. Services should be shaped by the voices of children, young people with lived experience. Transition planning must be consistent, transparent, and centred on the child/young person, ensuring clear pathways, informed decisions, and attention to their rights and needs.

Transition planning should begin several years before adulthood, with children's and adult services collaborating to develop appropriate adult provisions and inform future local and central budget planning.

SEND specialists in further education should work closely with universities to enable seamless transitions, with systems and funding in place to ensure equitable access and successful outcomes.

According to feedback from colleagues in our services, many students with SEND develop valuable skills but lack recognised accreditation, limiting clarity about next steps. Post-16 qualifications should address both academic and vocational abilities, enabling all students to progress and achieve their aspirations.