

SEND reform – document published Feb 26.

Reasons for change:

- Outcomes for pupils with SEND remain low
- Pupils with SEND more likely to be excluded
- Many have to travel long distances to get to school
- Lots of specialist schools are independent so expensive
- Number of EHCPs has doubled since 2014 reforms – rise in need mostly due to ASC, SEMH and SLCN.

Intended Purpose and structure:

- All about making each school setting able to meet the needs of pupils
- Provision of £7 billion more for SEND than in 2025/26
- SEND Code of Practice will be updated and strengthened so that young people 'receive the help and support they need'.
- EYFS will work with 'Best Start Family Hubs' to identify needs early on - £700m committed to BSFHs with a further £200m to strengthen the SEND part of BSFHs.
- New national SEND training programme will be introduced
- £1.6billion in next 3 years to make mainstream INCLUSIVE
- National Inclusion Standards will be set to standardise the support expected in all mainstream settings
- There will be a tiered, legally defined approach to support; those needing more than in universal offer will be supported by a new TARGETED offer, then TARGETED PLUS offer with access to speech therapists, small group interventions and curriculum adaptations before SPECIALIST SUPPORT level
- No need to apply for a statutory plan for TARGETED or TARGETED PLUS layers of support.
- New, digital 'Individual Support Plans' will be introduced for all pupils on targeted layers
- £1.8 billion in next 3 years to create 'EXPERTS AT HAND' to provide Educational psychologists, SALT and OT therapy support in schools much earlier to reduce needs later on

- More children will access multi-agency support through TARGETED PLUS and the SPECIALIST system than currently access this through EHCPs – provided through £200m
- £3.7 billion between 2026 and 2030 to create new special school places and tens of thousands of new places in INCLUSION BASES in mainstream schools
- Schools will have to produce an INCLUSION STRATEGY setting out what they provide at universal, targeted and targeted plus levels.
- There will be fewer EHCPs as more pupils will be supported through TARGETED PLUS levels
- New SPECIALIST PROVISION PACKAGES to be introduced for the specialist level – each offering support including curriculum adaptations, extra services, therapies, and resources – and will guide what is included in an EHCP.
- An independent panel will develop and maintain these specialist provision packages
- Specialist sector (special schools, APs) will support mainstream settings through outreach services
- Ofsted's new inspection framework will assess all settings for 'inclusion'
- School performance measures to be updated too, to reflect progress for those with barriers to learning (SEND)
- Ofsted and Care Quality Commission Area SEND inspection framework to align to statutory roles that local authorities and ICBs have in relation to pupils with SEND.
- Tribunals to be a LAST RESORT so investment will be made in mediation and school complaints processes to reduce tribunals.
- An independent panel will oversee development of National Inclusion Standards covering Specialist Provision Packages and inclusive mainstream practices.
- Children's Commissioner will have a new remit regarding scrutiny of SEND reform
- A Pupil Engagement Framework will help measure indicators of pupil experience
- Specific training to be introduced for TAs
- A new curriculum to be introduced – 'world leading'
- More funding into schools so they can use it earlier (LA top-ups to be given to schools beforehand)
- The Inclusive Mainstream Fund – designed to supplement existing core funding for SEND – being provided to schools now and calculated on a notional formula (which could impact us as low disadvantaged / pupil premium numbers)

Concerns:

- SEND reform is vague in terms of definitions, eg. what are the most 'complex needs'? This hasn't been agreed.
- NHS staff required to provide assessments and therapy plans – do we have enough? Likely to be a capacity mismatch. No comments on the training and increased numbers needed (SALT, OT) to deliver the 'Expert at Hands'. We can't get SALT and OT reviews as it is!
- Same with Educational Psychologists – where from? Who is going to pay them?
- Will school staff training really make any difference? We can't put in place what we know is needed now and that is not due to lack of training.
- How are they going to fund what they say we need? The billions quoted won't go far when shared across the country.
- If inclusive funding is shared across clusters of schools, will there be a recourse to LA for extra money to support needs when needed?
- Who will decide on the new *threshold* for specialist provision?
- There is very little 'new' here except to change names of the support levels, put more demands on schools to do more, stress the need for NHS and specialist support which we had previously but is reducing yearly.
- LAs will be recommending the setting for a pupil with an EHCP – family will retain a right to request elsewhere – but this is different and will mean families have to fight more for their preferred setting to be considered
- Parents will also be only able to express a preference for a mainstream setting not specialist
- Parents' rights to appeal look like they will be reduced, although it does say 'Families will retain the right to appeal to the tribunal'. The tribunal will NOT name the placement for the child as they currently do (in favour of the parents or authority)
- SEND Reform paper stresses the financial overspend so they will be focused on reducing this which is likely to impact support.
- Most of what is proposed is what should already be happening – and is already covered by SEND Code of Practice, Disability Act and Children and Families Act

Summary of impacts for stakeholders:

STAKEHOLDER	POSITIVE IMPACTS – if reform is successful	RISKS
Children & Young People	• Earlier identification and earlier support through the universal offer and Experts at Hand. • More consistent provision across the country due to National Inclusion Standards and legal status of ISPs.	• Potential reduced access to EHCPs if early-stage support is used to ‘gatekeep’ • National Inclusion Standards do not guarantee local capacity to deliver them. • Where will the Experts at Hand come from? • Review of EHCPs at secondary transition is a concern – this move is the very point that things tend to spiral for many young people and support is essential
Parents & Carers	• Clearer expectations of what mainstream schools must provide. • Potentially reduced need to “fight” for EHCPs if early support is reliable and appropriate under specialist packages • More accountability across agencies including NHS teams	• Difficulty understanding yet another system and changes to process / terminology (Targeted, Targeted Plus etc) • Reduced parental confidence if reforms are perceived as cost-driven rather than needs-driven. • Parental preference for school setting is reduced, with LA making decision and parents only having an opportunity to suggest alternatives • Inclusion-first policies may limit specialist placements • Parents have less scope for tribunal route / appeals if pupils who would have had an EHCP are being supported through ISPs • Continued frustration with lack of support if the capacity in schools and with the Experts at Hand is not adequately addressed
Teachers & School Leaders	• Access to Experts at Hand for specialist advice. • Clearer national expectations to show what mainstream schools must deliver.	• Implementing new universal and targeted support duties without guaranteed staffing. • National training requirements require time and release of staff from classroom to access. • Inclusion-rewarding systems may penalise schools with high-need cohorts unless adequate funding provided.

	• Potential reduction in EHCP tribunals / appeals.	• How much real Expert support will be provided? (NHS SALT, OT, EPs) • Pooling of resources with local schools could be contentious – how would that work in practice? • Would the reform mean that more children are in mainstream without the resources to support than at present?
Health & Social Care	• Clearer expectations for joint working. • Earlier involvement through Experts at Hand. • Specialists seeing children earlier to put appropriate support in place	• Reforms assume that sufficient numbers of specialists exist – no mention of numbers required or training needs • If health (NHS) and other specialists (EPs) cannot meet demand, schools will be taking the brunt of the pressure.
Local Authorities	• More predictable system through national standards. • Potential reduction in high-needs overspend longer-term if early intervention works.	• New duties, new support tiers, new systems. • Will there be more or less legal exposure? ISPs will be statutory but parental legal rights to challenge will be less as fewer EHCPs • Insufficient education, health and social care alignment: reforms assume multi-agency cooperation that is already weak and not working
Specialist & Alternative Provision Settings	• New Specialist Provision Packages aim to modernise and standardise specialist support. • Better commissioning frameworks. • More support will be given to mainstream schools	• Inclusion-first incentives may continue to reduce specialist placements even when these are more appropriate. • Funding uncertainty • Demand to support mainstream schools through outreach services will increase but is funding available for this to happen in practice?

What it means for us:

- The framework for the proposed SEND plans is largely there already with the SEND Code of Practice– it is just not being implemented correctly as not enough resources in terms of staff or money
- We will still have 3 layers of support after universal – no difference really, just terminology changing (we have universal or QFT, small group interventions, specialist involvement and SEN register (with PLP), then EHCP
- Assessments for the new system won't start until 2029. Until then we continue as normal with EHCP needs assessment requests.
- Current Year 2 class pupils with an EHCP are those who will first be reviewed at secondary transition to see if EHCP is still needed. This is a concern as often where the most support is needed.
- Once the new reforms are in place, only children needing a package of support detailed in a Specialist Provision Package will be entitled to an EHCP
- ISPs will replace our Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) – there will be a duty on schools to produce an ISP for any pupils with SEND and this will reviewed annually at least.
- Pupils who we might believe currently need an EHCP may end up with an ISP which is not legally binding – will schools as well as parents have less scope to 'fight' for what is needed?
- Might be more scope to trial assistive technology for those who need it to communicate which could be useful (eg. trialing GRID for iPad)
- We will need to show how the Inclusive Mainstream Fund is being spent - which will include publishing an Inclusion Strategy Report by December 2026 covering how we are deploying resources for SEND. Will this be different to the current SEND Information Report?
- Longer term, schools to pool resources from IMF across local SEND group of schools to share expertise and resources (including resource bases, staff etc). How will this work in practice?
- Local SEND groups will have to account for how spending is being used and the impact on pupil outcomes.
- Expectation of Governing Boards is to 'interrogate Inclusion Strategies' and 'sample ISPs'. Training for governors will be provided so they can fulfil their role on SEND.
- An annual review of all pupil movements (on and off roll, managed moves etc) will also be required so that 'inclusion' can be measured