



All-Party
Parliamentary Group for
**Special Educational Needs
and Disabilities (SEND)**



Reforming the SEND System in England

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The views expressed in this report are those of the group.

All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

www.naht.org.uk/appgsend

appg.send@naht.org.uk



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www.naht.org.uk



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Executive summary

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system in England is in urgent need of reform. Despite increases in funding, the system remains fragmented and under-resourced, with significant weaknesses in coordination, staffing, accountability and early intervention. Research by the Local Government Association (LGA) highlights the root causes of dysfunction and outlines the pressing need for a more integrated and functional model. This report explores the reasons for the current system's failure, the implications for local authorities and the features of a successful SEND system.

1. Challenges in the current SEND system

One of the most significant issues facing the current SEND system is its fragmented nature. The delivery of services involves multiple agencies — local authorities, schools, health services and social care providers — each of which operates under different objectives, accountabilities and frameworks. These differing priorities and performance targets create silos, meaning that services are often not joined up, resulting in a lack of continuity and effectiveness in the support offered to children and families. The absence of an overarching structure or shared accountability compounds this problem, leading to confusion over who is responsible for what. There also remains a lack of parity between the accountability levers on education and those on other sectors, further exacerbating tensions between sectors that need to be working collaboratively.

Despite the government increasing funding in some areas, resources remain insufficient to meet the growing and increasingly complex needs of children with SEND. Funding pressures have resulted in long waiting lists for services, limited provision in both mainstream and specialist settings, and challenges in delivering education, health and care plans (EHCPs) on time. Local authorities are often left in a position where they must make difficult choices about prioritising resources, which can lead to inequity and unmet needs.

Compounding the funding issues is a widespread shortage of skilled professionals. There is an acute shortfall in the recruitment and retention of speech and language therapists,

educational psychologists and other specialist support staff. This workforce crisis undermines the system's ability to deliver timely assessments, interventions and ongoing support. Overstretched professionals struggle to meet demand, leading to delays in services that can significantly affect children's educational and developmental progress.

A particularly damaging consequence of these systemic failures is the delay in early intervention. Timely identification and support are essential in preventing needs from escalating, yet the current system often reacts only once difficulties have become entrenched. This reactive rather than preventative approach not only leads to poorer outcomes for children but also results in higher costs for services in the long term.

Another core weakness in the system is the lack of clear accountability. With so many agencies involved, it is often unclear who holds ultimate responsibility for ensuring that children receive the support they need. Parents frequently find themselves caught between services, unsure of where to turn when things go wrong. Without transparent and enforceable accountability mechanisms, there is little recourse when responsibilities are not met.

Furthermore, the academisation of the education system has fragmented provision even further. Academies and multi-academy trusts operate under different governance structures and may adopt different policies for SEND provision, resulting in a lack of consistency and shared practices across local areas. This makes it more difficult for local authorities to coordinate services and creates an uneven playing field for children and families, depending on where they live and which school they attend.

2. Reasons for systemic failures (based on LGA research)

According to research and analysis by the Local Government Association, the current SEND system is struggling under the weight of increasing and more complex demand. More children are being identified with special needs, and the nature of those needs often requires intensive and costly support. However, the system has not expanded or evolved sufficiently to accommodate this rise, leading to capacity issues at every level.

In addition, there is wide regional variation in the way services are delivered. Some local areas have developed more integrated and effective models, while others lag behind. This inconsistency leads to unequal access to support, depending on postcode, and undermines national efforts to ensure equity.

The lack of effective joint working between education, health and social care remains a persistent problem. Although statutory frameworks such as the Children and Families Act 2014 aim to promote integrated working, implementation has been patchy. Often, services do not share data, plan jointly or align their commissioning strategies, resulting in duplication, gaps or misaligned provision.

Financial pressures exacerbate these challenges. While funding has increased, it is still not sufficient to meet the level of demand, especially when rising costs and inflation are factored in. Many local authorities are reporting high deficits in their high needs blocks, the part of the education budget designated for SEND. These financial pressures restrict their ability to innovate or respond flexibly to emerging needs.

When considering finances, the lack of inflationary increases in budgets such as the school notional funding (£10,000) and the special school place funding (£6,000) have resulted in the increasing and earlier pursuit of EHCPs and the subsequent high-needs top up that come with them than when they were first introduced over a decade ago.

The spending power of the notional £6,000 and special school place £10,000 has of course reduced since it began in 2013. If we were to consider the Bank of England inflation calculator, notional funding, if it reflected inflation over that period would now be worth £8,386 in 2025, and special school place funding would be worth £13,998.

For a special school that had retained 100 pupils on roll for that period, the difference in their budget would be an additional £399,800 in 2025.

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3. Impact on local authorities

Local authorities are disproportionately affected by the current failures in the SEND system. They are tasked with leading and coordinating services, yet are often left without the necessary levers or resources to do so effectively. Budget deficits caused by escalating demand and insufficient funding create significant operational stress. Local authorities face criticism when services fall short, even though they may have limited control over academies or health providers.

Operationally, authorities face challenges in coordinating between schools, NHS bodies and private providers — all of whom may work to different models. This fragmentation increases administrative workload and leads to inefficiencies that divert attention and funding from frontline support.

Moreover, the lack of clear accountability in the system places local authorities in a difficult position. When services are not delivered, it is often unclear whether the local authority or another provider is responsible, undermining public trust and eroding confidence in the system. Parents and carers may feel frustrated, disempowered, and forced to navigate an adversarial process to secure what their child is entitled to.

4. Characteristics of a functioning SEND system

An effective SEND system is one that operates through fully integrated and collaborative services. Health, education and social care must work in partnership, guided by a shared vision, agreed outcomes and aligned processes. Children and their families should experience a seamless service that responds to their needs holistically.

Clear accountability is essential. Each stakeholder must have a defined role and there must be robust mechanisms in place to ensure responsibilities are fulfilled. Oversight should be transparent and families must have a clear path to escalate concerns when the system fails to deliver.

Adequate funding is a basic prerequisite. Resources must match the scale and complexity of need, and funding mechanisms should incentivise inclusive practice and early intervention. This will reduce the need for expensive crisis intervention and enable more children to thrive in mainstream settings with the right support.

A skilled, sustainable workforce is also key across all involved sectors. Training, career progression and professional recognition must be improved to attract and retain the specialists needed to deliver high-quality SEND services. Workforce planning should be strategic and coordinated across sectors.

Critically, early intervention must be at the heart of the system. Proactively identifying and responding to needs improves outcomes and reduces costs. It also signals a more

compassionate, child-centred approach that recognises the importance of timely support in a child's development.

Standardisation of practices and procedures, particularly across different types of schools, is essential to ensure equity. Regardless of which school a child attends, they should receive consistent, high-quality support.

5. Recommendations for reform

To achieve meaningful change, a full system overhaul is required. This must begin with a redesign of the SEND framework to promote joined-up working and clarity of roles. A shared vision across all services is needed, supported by legislation that requires collaboration and joint accountability.

Funding allocations must be based on robust assessments of need and should empower local areas to innovate. Longer-term financial settlements would provide stability and allow for more strategic planning.

To fully realise the government's drive for inclusion in schools, core mainstream school budgets need to reflect the level of need they are now expected to support. For the majority of pupils with low-complexity, high-frequency SEN, core mainstream school budgets must be sufficient to meet their needs without recourse to high-needs top up funding.

The government must also address the workforce crisis by investing in recruitment and retention strategies, ensuring that the professionals required to deliver SEND support are available and well-trained.

The system must be reoriented to prioritise early intervention. Funding and policy incentives should reward preventative work, and schools should be supported to identify and address needs as early as possible.

While early intervention can occur throughout education whenever a CYP's additional needs may present, by definition, there remains a crucial need to significantly invest in early years

settings as well as the support services in health and social care that support families of younger children.

Much of the need for more costly and complex interventions later could be reduced if this sector was able to respond quicker and deliver intervention and support sooner.

A new accountability structure is essential. Responsibilities must be clearly defined and there should be independent oversight of how well local systems are working. This will create confidence that services are delivering effectively and fairly.

Finally, national government must ensure that its own policies align with local authority strategies. Without this alignment, local areas will continue to face contradictory pressures that hinder reform efforts.

6. Escalation and resolution mechanisms

When the system fails, there must be a clear and accessible route for families to raise concerns and seek resolution. Escalation processes should be transparent and consistent across regions, and families should not face unnecessary bureaucracy or delays.

Independent oversight bodies should be strengthened or established to ensure appeals and complaints are handled fairly and promptly. These bodies must have the authority to hold all service providers accountable, including academies and NHS trusts.

Learning from failures must be embedded into the system. The aim must be to resolve issues for the majority before recourse to complaints or tribunal, but that formal system must remain. Complaints and tribunal decisions should inform service improvement and policy reform, ensuring the system evolves based on real experiences.

7. Rebuilding trust

Rebuilding trust in the SEND system will take time and sustained effort. Transparency is vital — parents and carers must understand how decisions are made and who is responsible. Consistency across services and regions will provide reassurance that all children have equal access to support.

True trust will only be built when families feel heard, respected and when they see their child receiving the SEN support and provision they need and deserve. This means genuine engagement in the design and delivery of services, and a culture that values partnership with parents, carers and young people.

Ultimately, a system that listens, learns and adapts will be one that earns the confidence of those it is designed to serve.

Conclusion

The SEND system in England is not working as it should. Children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families, are being let down by a fragmented, under-resourced and unclear system. Reform is essential. By committing to early intervention, building a skilled workforce, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring proper funding and accountability, we can move toward a SEND system that truly delivers for all.

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