

Reimagining Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Policy in England: Inclusive Education and System Change

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Webinar content

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- Current SEND statistics (Academic Year 2025-2026)
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Special educational needs and disability (SEND) policy context [1]

A SEND policy review (government) was announced in **September 2019**.

The review (launched under a previous government) sought to examine the implementation of the **2014 Children and Families Act (Part 3)**.

This legislation was introduced with substantive support (not universal) from politicians, professionals (education, health and social care) and parents, heralding a new era of co-produced support for children, young people with SEND and their families.

The new legislation (with revised 2015 0 to 25 years SEND Code of Practice guidance) was informed, in part, by the ***Lamb Inquiry*** report (2009) and an influential review of SEND policy and practice – ***A Statement is Not Enough*** - published by Ofsted in 2010).

Lamb called for evolutionary policy change that focused on improving system efficiency, in ways that acknowledged the concerns of families with direct experience of navigating this system. Ofsted claimed too many children and young people with SEND were being identified (unnecessarily in some instances) and that Statements of SEN were often ineffective. Legislation also aligned with the political view (Conservative PM, David Cameron) that **inclusion had gone too far** in the previous decade!

Special educational needs and disability (SEND) policy context [2]

Many political and policy boats have sailed since September 2019, begging questions about the ‘problem’ (e.g. over-identification of need, under-estimation of need) being addressed, political understanding and the skillset of the civil service and its advisers.

During this hiatus, pressure for change (gradual or radical) has increased in intensity, with key protagonists including:

- parents and carers
- parent and carer / child or young person focused organisations
- research organisations (with varying degrees of independence from national and/or local government)
- local authorities (e.g. County Councils Network and the Local Government Association)
- professional associations/bodies (representing school/setting staff, health professionals etc.)
- organisations developing or running provision (e.g. independent special schools and colleges)
- government departments and divisions with the Department for Education (DfE)

Notwithstanding tensions between protagonists and political/policy leadership/development, the pressure for change has increasingly focused on the probability of an existential SEND system failure.

White Paper and consultation

February 2026 (current government published its SEND review)

The Schools White Paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, was published in February 2026.

At the same time, government published *SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First – a consultation* (various formats and edited versions) and *6,500 Additional Teachers – delivery plan*.

The consultation (detailed plan for reform)* closed on **18 May 2026** at 11.59 pm.

It included **39 questions** related to proposed reforms. The consultation guidance wording was edited/updated on 30 March 2026, following a legal challenge:

*“We welcome and will carefully consider comments and representations on all **aspects of the consultation paper and subjects related to the proposed reforms, in addition to the specific consultation questions.** Further contributions can be made in the text box at Question 39 or in the text box of Question 12 in the Easy Read version.”*

[SEND reform: putting children and young people first - GOV.UK](#)

* **The consultation** also included a range of other engagement activities

No quick fix

Important not to underestimate negative experiences for families in this context.

At the same time, we know that many schools/settings and provide excellent support for children, young people and their families, albeit that this is sometimes despite national and area SEND implementation that has been ineffective.

The government is committing to a decade-long and phased reform programme (**P1 2026-2028** - investment and building a new system; **P2 2028-2029** – improved support; **P3 2029/30 >** – future system rollout). Realistic as this might be, it will have taken sixteen years to have addressed concerns about the **2014 Children and Families Act**, when children start their education at the beginning of the next decade.

“The result will be an education system, together with all local services, that removes barriers, raises aspirations, and achieves better outcome, with far more children supported to achieve and thrive in mainstream school, college or early years setting, and high-quality specialist provision available for children who need it. This is not a short-term fix; it is a commitment to inclusion, excellence, and opportunity for every child.” (*Government consultation*, p.12)

SEND statistics (England) 2025-2026 [1]

Pupils with an EHC plan

- **538,547 pupils** in schools in England. Up by 11.6% from 2025

EHC plan (percent)

- **6.0% percent** of pupils with an EHC plan. Up from 5.3% in 2025

Pupils with SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan

- **1,319,780 pupils** in schools in England. Up by 2.8% from 2025

SEN support/SEN without an EHC plan (percent)

- **14.8% percent of pupils** with SEN support. Up from 14.2%

1.8 million pupils in England have special educational needs (SEN)

- This is an **increase of 91,400 (5.2%)** pupils since 2025 and includes pupils with an education, health and care plan (EHC) plan and pupils with SEN support. The increasing trend has continued since 2016.
- The **most common type of need** for those with an **EHC plan** is **autistic spectrum** disorder [**DfE terminology, not mine!**], and for those with SEN support is **speech, language and communication needs**.

[Release home - Special educational needs in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#) (11 June 2026)

SEND statistics (England) 2025-2026 [2]

SEN units and resourced provisions

SEN units are special provisions within a mainstream school where the pupils with SEN are taught within separate classes for at least half of their time.

Resourced provisions are places that are reserved at a mainstream school for pupils with a specific type of SEN, taught for at least half of their time within mainstream classes, but requiring a base and some specialist facilities around the school.

Most pupils placed in units will have an EHC plan. It is unlikely that a child would be placed in a unit and also receive support from resourced provision, but a school could have resourced provision for one type of need and a unit for another.

In January 2026, there were 514 schools in England with SEN units, an increase from 449 in 2025. There were 1,309 schools with a resourced provision, a slight increase from 1,217 in 2025.

Most pupils with SEND are educated in mainstream schools and in the state sector, as they have been for many years

- **88%** of pupils with SEND are educated in mainstream settings, and
- **92%** of pupils with SEND are educated in the state sector.

[Release home - Special educational needs in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#) (11 June 2026)

*See **later slide** for details of new **government guidance on inclusion bases in schools**

SEND statistics (England) 2025-2026 [3]

Children and young people in England with an education, health and care plan (EHC), including annual local authority activity on EHC requests and assessments

- **The total number of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans has continued to increase**

The number of children and young people with EHC plans increased to 718,800, as at census day in January 2026, 12.5% higher than at January 2025. This is the highest year on year increase since EHC plans were introduced in 2014. This relates to all children and young people (aged 0 to 25) with an EHC plan, including those where the child or young person attends early years settings, further education or is educated elsewhere.

- **The number of new EHC plans issued in the calendar year has continued to increase**

There were 110,700 new EHC plans issued during the 2025 calendar year, 13.3% higher than the number issued during 2024. The number of new EHC plans has increased each year since their introduction in 2014.

- **The number of requests for, and number of EHC needs assessments carried out, has continued to increase**

There were 162,700 requests for an EHC needs assessment received during 2025, 5.3% higher than the number received during 2024. Local authorities (LAs) decided to proceed to an assessment for 65.2% of these requests, this is a similar proportion to 2024 (65.4%).

There were 118,800 EHC needs assessments carried out during 2025, 12.8% more than in 2024. The decision was to issue an EHC plan for 93.6% of assessments, the same as during 2024.

- **The percentage of plans issued with the statutory timeframe of 20 weeks has decreased**

During 2025, 46.1% of new EHC plans were issued within the twenty-week statutory timeframe. This is slightly lower than during 2024 when this figure was 46.4%. These figures exclude cases where exceptions apply.

The King's Speech (13 May) 2026

The King's Speech* announced the '*Education for All*' Bill** intended to “raise standards in schools and introduce generational reforms of the special educational needs system”.

The Bill is pending and expected to be introduced to Parliament imminently.

Note that the Bill announcement (13 May) was made before the White Paper consultation closed (18 May).

*The Monarch's Speech is delivered by the Monarch from the Throne in the House of Lords. Although the Monarch reads the Speech, **it is written by the government**. It contains an **outline of its policies and proposed legislation for the new parliamentary session** (2026-2027). Parliament is currently in conference recess.

**Bills are proposals for new laws. If they pass every stage of scrutiny in the House of Commons and House of Lords, and receive Royal Assent they become Acts of Parliament, and Law.

Principles underpinning SEND reform

1. **Early.** *Children should receive the support they need as soon as possible, with a quick response to changing needs. This will start to break the cycle of needs going unmet and getting worse. Instead, we will intervene swiftly and proactively, focusing on providing support earlier in children's lives when this can have the greatest impact.*
2. **Local.** *Children and young people with SEND should be able to learn at a setting close to their home, alongside their peers, rather than travelling long distances from their family and community. Special schools should continue to play a vital role supporting those with the most complex needs.*
3. **Fair.** *Every school should be resourced and able to meet common and predictable needs, including as they change over time, without parents having to fight to get support for their children. Where specialist provision is needed for children and young people, we will ensure it is there, whether that be a mainstream, specialist or Alternative Provision setting, with clear legal requirements and safeguards for children and parents.*
4. **Effective.** *Reforms should be grounded in evidence, ensuring all education settings know where to go to find effective practice that has excellent long-term outcomes for children and young people.*
5. **Shared.** *Education, health and care services should work in partnership with one another. Best Start Family Hubs, local government, families, teachers, experts and representative bodies to deliver better experiences and outcomes for all our children and young people. The voices of children should be at the heart of decision making.*

Principles to practice

Adhering to these five principles, we can expect legislation (supported with statutory and non-statutory guidance in due course) that will seek to reduce reliance on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) as the primary route to support.

Instead, effective support will be made available through universal early identification and structured in-school (early years/post-16 provider) intervention *and* bolstered by new (extended) 'statutory' duties.

Legislative proposals – indicative [1]

Statutory individual support plans (ISPs) - for all children and young people with SEND – intended to reduce reliance on EHCPs for those with a lower level of need

National Inclusion Standards (NIPs) – benchmark/baseline expectation for identification, assessment, intervention, and inclusive practice across all early years, school, and post-16 provision

Strengthened training duty – requiring staff in every setting to receive training in SEND and inclusion (requirements to be detailed in a revised SEND Code of Practice and supported by additional central government funding)

Mainstream inclusion reforms – including new requirements on settings to publish inclusion strategies and demonstrate cohort-level planning to remove barriers to education, and hold settings to account on strengthening inclusive practice

Legislative proposals – indicative [2]

Funding reform - additional funding and a requirement for schools to pool a proportion of their funding for SEND, with the aim of reducing local – ‘postcode lottery’ - variation in provision

Standardised EHCP templates – with revised review cycles

Special Provision Packages (SPPs) – for children and young people with ‘complex needs’, and enhanced specialist support for those with ‘less complex’ needs in mainstream schools/settings

Reforms to the SEND Tribunal system (national) – with new concern/complaint procedures at local, school/setting level

Altering current policy architecture

The Education for All Bill will seek to recalibrate the relationship between mainstream and specialist provision, with a framework that presumes:

- **earlier intervention** within mainstream (universal > < targeted approach)
- **specialist support** for mainstream provided by an Experts at Hand service (local authority and health service professionals, special school outreach staff) (see Robertson, 2026b for commentary)
- highly **targeted specialist provision** for children and young people with the complex need (with a shift to more local provision, and the use of cost effective regional/national provision for those with the most complex needs).

The approach will be underpinned by multi-billion-pound capital and workforce development funding – focusing on increasing specialist placement capacity, improving accessibility of provision, and improving mainstream access to specialist support services. It also commits to **expansion of inclusion bases** in mainstream.

System transition

System transition will include key protections/safeguards for children, young people and families:

- no child/young person will lose existing support during transition
- those in specialist placements as of September 2029 will be able to remain in them until the end of education (18+?)
- changes – as noted - will be phased rather than immediate (this was the case with the 2014 legislation too, but problems of implementation still occurred).

Accountability

- Inclusion Standards
- Inspection (Ofsted 2026 > inclusion*) (education providers and local areas)
- School complaints data monitoring
- School inclusion strategy duty

*The **current/new inspection framework is already considered to be unfit for purpose**, with concerns about the evaluation of inclusion (see Robertson, 2025a; Stacey and Adams, 2026)

- Local authority area role (strategic plans**), including co-operation with health services (Robertson, 2026a)
- SEND complaint panels (school level)
- Parent Carer Forums (constraints?）**
- National level complaint procedures (SEND Tribunal and the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman) – with **limits**? (Moore, 2026)

****Concern about inducement or pressure** from central government (Reyes, 2026)

Inclusive Education in England

“We **welcome definitions of inclusion which can help guide actions** that meet all children’s needs, including: ‘Inclusion is all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve, and thrive’. Within this, it is crucial we go further to deliver inclusion for children with SEND. In doing so, we will be guided by the ***UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities***. To achieve an inclusive education system, we will:

- strengthen the law to ensure **evidence-based support for children and young people is provided early in mainstream settings** so they can stay in education, achieve and thrive alongside their peers;
- **integrate support across health, care, and family services**, ensuring children’s needs are identified and addressed as soon as they emerge; and
- **increase upfront investment** so support is readily available for classes and communities of children, rather than locked behind lengthy and bureaucratic individual assessment processes.

“The **evidence is compelling**: children and young people learning alongside their peers has proven academic and social benefits for all children. Pupils with SEND who are educated in inclusive mainstream schools are twice as likely to find employment and live independent lives compared to those with similar needs in special classes. **Learning in their local community** gives all children the confidence, resilience, and independence they need to lead fulfilling lives. **For children and young people with the most complex needs, special schools provide the right environment** to make meaningful progress and build independence, but these schools should also **be connected** to the wider system and communities.”

Government (White Paper) consultation document, p.8

From consultation to implementation: a 'new politics' of change?

The government consultation on its proposed SEND reforms clearly indicated its policy intention – to introduce a more inclusion focused (mainstream) SEND system, with a strong emphasis on local-level provision and national level standardised expectations.

The *Education for All* Bill is the primary vehicle for bringing about the proposed policy reforms.

Bill details are subject to Parliamentary scrutiny and further drafting (e.g. to take account of White Paper consultation feedback and other feedback received by MPs).

It will be interesting to see what the political impact of scrutiny will be, given the unprecedented level of engagement/concern about the reforms expressed by families, many professionals, most notably through social media and mainstream press publications. But also, via political procedures designed to protect democratic process (e.g. the successful Tee-Jay petition - [Protect legal right to support for children with SEND – Petitions](#) – **see appendix** slide for further detail)

Underlying policy tensions: the competition-coherence dilemma

“The scale of the challenge facing the government if it truly wants to achieve its vision of having schools “rooted in their communities” via academy trusts is underlined today in a new analysis by Education Uncovered* of the geographical spread of these chains.

“Several of England’s largest multi-academy trusts are sprawled across the country, with two chains operating in eight of the Department for Education’s 10 regions, and a further three running schools in at least six regions.

“The data suggest that the way that the multi-academy trust model has been allowed to develop by the DfE over the past two decades may prove difficult to align with its new vision, as set out in February’s schools white paper, that the system now needs to prioritise “geographical coherence”.”

[*Education Uncovered | News| Collision of DfE vision of “local” academy trusts with their geographically-spread reality exposed in new analysis](#) (11 June 2026)

Government publication update as policy planning gets up to speed: inclusion bases

The government has published **non-statutory** guidance (25 June 2026) on the role of inclusion bases run by schools and local authorities in England (twin-model) (See Robertson 2026c for commentary):

[Inclusion bases in schools - GOV.UK](#)

[SEND bases in mainstream schools: parent views - GOV.UK](#)

[SEN units and resourced provision: insights from expert interviews - GOV.UK](#)

It has also published (25 June 2026) non-statutory guidance on ***Inclusive education estates Supporting inclusive environments in mainstream settings***

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-education-estates>

Government publication update as policy planning gets up to speed: professional development

SEND training for schools: inclusive teaching and areas of development

- Training materials to help teachers and teaching assistants in mainstream schools understand and apply the new **[draft] areas of development** within inclusive teaching practices.

Published (24 September 2026)

[SEND training for schools: inclusive teaching and areas of development - GOV.UK](#)

Post-16

[SEND training for post-16 settings: guide to materials - GOV.UK](#) (incomplete)

Early years

[Early Years CPD Training - Dingley's Promise](#)

More training material is 'in progress' and will be available in coming months (>2027)

Politics, policy and legal framework concerns

A succinct commentary on political context and legal issues related to pending SEND reforms:

Reyes, E. (2026) Children in Need, *The Law Society Gazette*, October 2, 15-18.

[Law Society Gazette](#)

“The government’s SEND reforms landed badly with many families, lawyers and campaigners earlier this year. In 2025 the Gazette revealed plans to ‘hobble’ the SEND Tribunal’s jurisdiction and powers. There was a furious response from DfE. Yet the consultation contained just such proposals. In fact, SEND law and policy experts have now picked up on **20 legal rights** threatened by the reforms.* A promised increase in funds for SEND is nevertheless welcome. But is the money conditional on thousands of children losing rights available through education, health and care plans, and being forced into mainstream settings where they will be handed pre-determined packages?” (p.14)

*See *Special Needs Jungle* (9 September 2026). Note **links between SEND reform** proposals and the recently concluded (18 September) **consultation on Education Otherwise** than at School (EOTAS/EOTIS).

Politics, policy and the legal framework: now and next

“The next significant opportunity for parliamentary scrutiny of SEND law reforms may come before the publication of a bill or draft bill. A parliamentary petition (Protect legal right to support for children with SEND), started by 14-year-old campaigner Tee-Jay, which calls on the government to protect the legal right to support for children and young people with SEND, passed 100,000 signatures this week [beginning 28 September 2026]. That is the threshold for a parliamentary debate, to which a minister must respond.” (p.18)

Reyes, E. (2026) Children in Need, *The Law Society Gazette*, October 2, 15-18.

[Law Society Gazette](#)

Parliament (House of Commons) returns, following recess for party conferences, on 12 October 2026.

We await publication of the government’s response to its SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First’. This should have been published (‘in a timely fashion’) within 12 weeks of the consultation close date (18 May 2026) in accordance with Cabinet Office (2018) guidance.

Policy, implementation and procrastination

Whoosh

“I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by.”

Douglas Adams (2002)

Witty, but the impact of high-level dithering on families is devastating.

Contact details

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Further reading and references [1]

Cabinet Office (2018) *Consultation principles: Guidance* [Consultation principles - GOV.UK](#)

Long, R., Bridges, E. and Roberts, N. (2026) The Schools White Paper 2026: Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Reform. *House of Commons Library*: Research briefing Number 10550 (1 September) [The Schools White Paper 2026: Special Educational Needs and Disability \(SEND\) Reform - House of Commons Library](#)

Moore, C. (2026) SEN reforms: We need a system that's accountable and meets individual needs. IPSEA policy blog, 24 September. [SEND reforms: we need a system that's accountable and meets individual needs](#)

Reyes, E. (2026) Children in Need, *The Law Society Gazette*, 2 October, 14-18. [Law Society Gazette](#)

Robertson, C. (2025a) Ofsted and its 'new' approach to ensuring accountability for inclusive education. *British Journal of Special Education*, 00, 1–3. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70037>

Robertson, C. (2025b) SENCos and the schools white paper. *British Journal of Special Education*, 00, 1–2. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70053>

Further reading and references [2]

Robertson, C. (2025c) A key role for SENCos in solving the SEND crisis in England, *British Journal of Special Education*, 00, 1-3. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70063>

Robertson, C. (2026a) Local area strategic leadership to support and enhance the role of SENCos. *British Journal of Special Education*, 53, 151–153. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70094>

Robertson, C. (2026b) Improving the quality of mainstream education: The promise of additional support raises more questions than answers for SENCos, *British Journal of Special Education*, 00, 1-4. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70107>

Robertson, C. (2026c) Inclusion bases and the improvement of special educational needs and disability provision in schools: Panacea or policy- patching? *British Journal of Special Education*, 53, 425–428. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.70122>

Special Needs Jungle (2026) The unacceptable truth: 20 legal rights at risk. *Special Needs Jungle (website)*. 9 September [The Unacceptable Truth: 20 SEND legal rights at risk from the Government's SEND reforms — Special Needs Jungle](#)

Stacey, K. and Adams, England school inspections to be overhauled again after barrage of complaints. *The Guardian*. 2 October. [England school inspections to be overhauled again after barrage of complaints | Schools | The Guardian](#)

Appendix: Tee-Jay's petition*

Protect legal right to support for children with SEND

Created by **Tee-Jay Chetwynd**

Closes on **14 October 2026**

I believe that the Government's proposed SEND reforms could limit EHCPs, weaken legal rights, replace individual plans with packages, reduce appeals, and remove school choice. In my view, children could be left without the support they need as a result.

I think the Government's SEND reforms could limit EHCPs, weaken legal rights, raise thresholds, replace individual plans with generic packages, reduce appeal rights, remove school choice, and push children into inclusion zones without proper support. Many children rely on these rights to support every day, without them many could be left behind, struggling, unsupported, and unheard.

This petition will be considered for debate in Parliament (confirmed on 30 September 2026)

This petition got more than 100,000 signatures meaning the Petitions Committee will consider it for debate in Parliament.

*British citizens and UK residents can call for action from the UK Government or UK Parliament by creating and submitting an e-petition