

What families and schools in St Helens North need from the SEND system

November 2025



"We need to ensure every child, regardless of their needs, can access quality education without their parents having to fight the system. The additional stress that is caused is very significant to not just the child but everyone involved.

Getting my son into a school that can meet his needs shouldn't have been so hard."

Andy, dad of a child in specialist provision

"It's time to scrap the Victorian school model and adapt to the reality of neurodiversity, acknowledging that many children run on a different 'operating system' so are set up to fail within the existing rigid, outdated one."

Su, mum of three neurodivergent children in a mainstream secondary school

"The schools need more funding to help train staff to have the knowledge and time to care for SEN children properly in mainstream, not a one-size-fits-all system!"

Erin, Mum of a 7 year old in a mainstream school

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1 Foreword

It is clear that the current SEND system is not working. Too many families and their children struggle to get the support they need, despite the best efforts of our schools and colleges who are themselves suffering the consequences of years of underinvestment.

As a former volunteer youth worker, teacher, and council leader, I have long been passionate about doing everything in my power to help children get the best start in life regardless of their background or additional needs. This is a priority for the Labour government too. We recognise that things need to change. The recently published Curriculum and Assessment Review is a start, and Ministers will shortly be publishing a White Paper setting out proposals to improve our Schools and SEND provision.

I want to make sure the voices of families in St Helens North are heard at those highest levels and help to shape any forthcoming changes. The feedback I have received from dozens of parents, carers, advocates, teachers, headteachers and SENDCOs have informed this report, which will be presented to Ministers in the Department for Education. I hope it is also informative for families in St Helens North and all those with an interest in improving outcomes for children.

We need to reform the system to make sure that no child is left behind, and I hope the views of families and schools in St Helens North will help to inform and influence the change we need.

Thank you to all those who shared their personal experiences, and thank you to all our schools for everything they do.

David

DAVID BAINES MP
Member of Parliament for St Helens North



2 Summary

In addition to the hundreds of emails, letters, conversations and personal cases I have dealt with as MP since July 2024, I specifically sought the views of dozens of local parents, carers and educators to help inform this report as well as many groups, charities and campaigners fighting for change.

This issue is extremely complex and this report is relatively short, so it is far from comprehensive. It is intended to highlight some of the outstanding campaigning taking place and the key recommendations of other studies (see section **3**) and most importantly to tell government the views and the priorities of families and schools in St Helens North (see sections **4** and **5**).

The following common themes have emerged:

EHCPs: The process is too complex and slow. Too many families feel they have to fight too hard to get the support their children need and deserve. Schools are under-resourced to provide the standard of care and learning they would like to give and which EHCPs – in theory – guarantee, and with more early intervention and resource they could avoid some families having to go down the more costly and lengthy EHCP route. The legal right to support must remain and be backed up with the necessary resource. Inconsistencies across boroughs are adding to delays.

The wider assessment and referral system: The process for assessing additional learning needs such as dyslexia, ADHD, autism and speech and language is too slow. While schools do their best from day one, far too much time is passing before pupils are assessed and the right support provided. Capacity needs to be added to the system in schools, local authorities and health.

Communication: Communication between families, schools, and local councils needs to be clear and quick, in every direction, so that less time is wasted chasing referrals and so that there is less opportunity for misinformation and misunderstanding. Technology should be used to develop a shared system for schools to make and track referrals.

2 Summary

Early intervention: Schools report that increasing numbers of children are starting school behind where they should be. Economic and societal factors including the cost of living crisis and deprivation are causing more families to face challenges, while years of underinvestment in wraparound support means more of them are facing these challenges alone. This trend needs to be reversed with significant investment in early intervention both pre-school and within schools.

Curriculum, teaching and assessment: The curriculum is too packed and formal assessments are too rigid. There is a lack of faith in the value of Year 6 SATs and there is opportunity to reform them. Schools need the freedom and capacity to cater for all learning styles from day one as a baseline, including the ability to integrate play into the learning experience. Changes including embedding continuous provision throughout Key Stage One in England – as it is in Scotland and Wales – should be considered for the benefit of every single child. Speech and language is also undervalued. Expectations about traditional methods of recording work are placing unnecessary burdens on teachers and pupils, especially those with moderate additional learning needs.

Funding: Our state schools are suffering from years of underfunding. In almost every case mainstream schools are already understaffed and under-resourced, and rising SEND numbers are causing even greater pressure.

Staffing: Mainstream schools too often feel unable to provide an adequate level of support to all pupils. Every classroom has children who would benefit from support, and too many schools feel they are letting children down because of understaffing. Investment in learning assistants and guarantees about provision in every classroom should be part and parcel of any reforms.

Training: Schools want to do the best for each and every child. They want and need more training to help them, both for new entrants to the teaching profession, for learning assistants who are absolutely vital, and continuously throughout all their careers.

3 The case for change

The Labour government recognises the urgent need for change. The previous Conservative government left a system that even their own Education Secretary described as “[lose, lose, lose](#)” and the Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson has spoken about her determination to fix things many times since coming into post in July 2024, and so too has the Prime Minister.

My very first question in Parliament was on SEND: <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1017397826439821>, and I have raised it many times since.

I have written for Schools Week about the opportunity this government has to make lasting and beneficial change: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/this-parliament-is-our-best-hope-of-send-reform-in-a-generation/>.

It is an opportunity we mustn't miss.

The Institute of Fiscal Studies has set out the facts and figures: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/englands-send-crisis-costs-challenges-and-case-reform>.

In St Helens, EHCP requests increased by 17.8% between 2023/24 and 2024/25 – significantly above the national average of 11.8%. A shortage of maintained school places has increased reliance on the Independent Sector, where placements can cost up to three times more than maintained alternatives. One charges an annual cost of £99,321 for a single pupil, compared with annual local authority maintained costs of £17,655 for Resourced Provision and £24,601 for a Special School.

As of October 2025, St Helens Borough Council has 2,585 open EHCPs. 8% of these, (211) are currently placed in independent (private) provision. The annual cost of these placements is £13,887,062.62 and each year these costs are likely to go up due to providers charging above-inflation increases. So far, attempts to control costs through a Regional Purchasing Framework have had limited success in curbing provider pricing practices.

3 The case for change

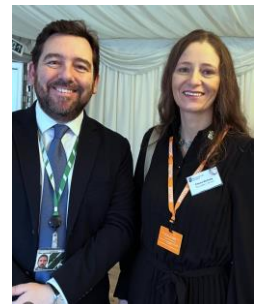
These numbers are shocking and unsustainable, but this isn't about statistics. Behind all the numbers are children, families, and schools fighting for support. Yes, there is an economic cost to the current system – but much more importantly there is a human cost.

SEND in general still isn't spoken about enough, but it is now getting more worthy attention. Recent high profile campaigns have included calls from 22 parent organisations to [rethink Year 6 SATs due to the damage they cause to SEN children in particular](#); the [BBC Panorama documentary 'Autism, School, and Families on the Edge'](#) by Kellie Bright; and the [Jamie Oliver documentary 'Jamie's Dyslexia Revolution'](#).

As a vice chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Dyslexia I was honoured to meet Jamie and to support the **British Dyslexia Association** in their efforts to increase awareness and support. They recently launched a [unique voice petition](#) and I support their calls for **comprehensive early screening for dyslexia** and **better teacher training**, which would make a difference to every child.

Speech and Language UK have published an [alternative White Paper](#) and their [Pre-Phonics Boost](#) campaign would give more children the foundational skills they need to learn to read and write, and **Tourette's Action** are doing [outstanding work to raise awareness of Tourette's](#).

The **Disabled Children's Partnership** are campaigning for reform of the SEND system and the protection of basic rights. Their '[Fight for Ordinary](#)' campaign aims to ensure children get the right support without having to fight.



3 The case for change

Government should engage with important campaigns to highlight **the vital importance of play** and to expand children's access to it as part of the curriculum. Continuous provision currently ends in England at age 5 when children leave Reception, in contrast to Scotland, Wales, and other countries including Finland and Singapore where it is part of the curriculum until the age of 7. Campaigner and education consultant Ruth Lue-Quee – MyMummyTeacher/MMT Play – has launched a [petition calling for play-based learning and continuous provision to be made statutory throughout Key Stage One](#) which at the time of writing has over 100,000 signatures.

Others have also highlighted the importance of play, including the [Power of Play initiative](#), which is an exciting partnership between the LEGO Group, Save the Children UK, Young V&A, EasyPeasy and the Institute of Imagination.

There is also fantastic and vital work being done to consider what needs to be done to help all children and reform education more widely. **Lessons4Life**, led by Hayley Sherwood, have published [a fantastic paper titled 'The Cycle of Missed Opportunities'](#) about what we can do to help all our young people become happy and healthy with proper time and investment given to their personal development. [I was honoured to open their launch event in July.](#)

I've also met with both the [Fair Education Alliance](#) and the [Children's Society](#) to discuss wider inequalities in education and childhood in general, and this is vital to addressing the problems with SEND provision. [The recent report by the Sutton Trust spells out the disadvantages faced by children from poorer families.](#)



3 The case for change

Two recent parliamentary reports have also made the case for change. [The Education Select Committee published a report in September 2025](#) setting out a series of recommendations calling for extensive investment and reform, including:

- Ensuring SEND support is an intrinsic part of the mainstream education system, rather than an addition to it.
- Embedding inclusivity in all education settings, from early years through to post-16, and identifying needs as early as possible in a child's life.
- Increasing the number of state specialist schools.
- Investing in the skills of all current and future school staff.
- Improving accountability across the SEND system, including the accountability of health services.
- Reviewing the national funding formula for schools.
- Increasing the involvement of parents in planning and decision making around their child's education.

[The SEND APPG has also provided a series of recommendations](#) to the government including a redesign of the SEND framework to promote joined-up working and clarity of roles, longer-term financial settlements to provide stability and allow for more strategic planning, investment in strategic recruitment and retention, and implementing a new accountability structure, with independent oversight to monitor the performance of local systems.

I know from conversations with Ministers that they are determined to reform the system so that it helps more children and their families. There is a significant opportunity in this parliament to deliver that change, and it has never been more urgent. There is no shortage of people and organisations ready and willing to help, and as the following sections show, families and schools are all desperate for us to succeed.

“Our daughter should never have to go to school to survive – she should be given easy access to all the tools she needs in order to thrive.

Getting her the help that she deserves is the hardest battle we have ever had. She has the right to contribute to society so she shouldn't be left to struggle throughout her education and life.”

Steph, mum of a 4 year old in a mainstream school

“We need better resources and play equipment within SEND schools.”

Zoe, mum of a 10 year old in specialist provision

“We need to feel like our children are treated as equals and not a problem that the authorities don't have money for.”

Michelle, mum of a 10 year old in specialist provision

4 What families say

“Every child with SEND deserves timely, effective support to thrive. When we overlook their needs, we limit their futures.”

Emma, mum of a 15 year old girl in a mainstream school



I have received hundreds of emails, letters and calls from families in St Helens North about SEND since being elected as MP. As well as that feedback, I organised specific forums with local parents, carers and advocates to hear about the challenges they face and to discuss what the government could and should be doing as part of its forthcoming reforms.

I asked all those who attended which of the following given list should be the government's priority, and responses were:

- Faster access to assessments/diagnoses: 10
- **Better funding for schools and SEND services: 15**
- More specialist provision: 12
- Training for all school staff on SEND: 10
- Stronger accountability for local authorities and schools: 13
- Improved transition support (e.g., to secondary, post-16, adulthood): 6
- Mental health and wellbeing support: 8

"Trying to plaster over the cracks in this broken system will not suffice. It needs widespread, collaborative reform. It's the very least our children deserve."

Gill, mum of a 7 year old in specialist provision

4 What families say

I also asked families for their thoughts about what's currently working well, what's not working, and what would make a relatively quick and big difference. Feedback gathered from the forums and via email included:

What's working well?

- Children and Families Act is seen as good legislation.
- EHCPs and the legal right to support needs to be protected.
- Frontline staff care, are strong, and they listen.
- It's good that parents are speaking up and fighting back.
- A lot of good charities and organisations are offering advice.
- Parents have formed a SEND community to share help and advice. Families find this mutual support invaluable.

What's not working?

- Pressure on schools to focus on academic results marginalises SEND children.
 - Assessments and particularly Year 6 SATs can be damaging for SEN children – and families feel secondary schools don't put much weight on them anyway.
 - We don't do enough to protect the rights of children who cannot be heard.
 - Parents get a piece of paper with a diagnosis but no guidance.
 - Routes of redress for maladministration and unlawful process are not easily available to families.
 - Every process is obviously too slow and reactive and the EHCP process is too complex.
 - There's a lack of multi-agency working – systems aren't just complex but they don't talk to one another and share information as easily as they should.
 - Health services don't seem as invested or as involved in the process as education/council and they should be central.
 - Concern for children who don't have parents able to fight.
 - A lack of training and resources in schools to help them cater for every child's specific learning needs.
 - Large class sizes intimidate SEN children and make teachers' jobs more difficult.
-

4 What families say

- Poor communication between relevant agencies.
- Lack of early intervention in schools which could help avoid bigger problems.
- Parents being made to feel blame for simply wanting the best for their child. Feel dragged into a war of attrition.
- Concern about a lack of accountability for academy schools.
- More respite services needed to support families.
- Feeling of constant uncertainty causes anxiety and affects whole life.
- Lack of social opportunities for children with SEND – It makes families feel lonely and isolated.
- Unregulated advocates might take advantage of families.

What would make a difference?

- Let teachers be teachers, not grade chasers.
- Reform Ofsted – they force schools to concentrate on too much that distracts them from childrens' real needs.
- Take a holistic view of every child and build a system that allows the time for this to be done.
- Be more like Finland!
- Reform the whole Victorian education system:
 - Less formal classrooms
 - Reduce testing
 - Change the curriculum to meet today's needs
- EHCP outcomes need to be realistic and measurable.
- Move from digital to face to face assessments.
- Look at 'summer born' guidance and consider educating in classes out of the normal/accepted cohort system. 'Stage not age'.
- Smaller 'like with like' classes.



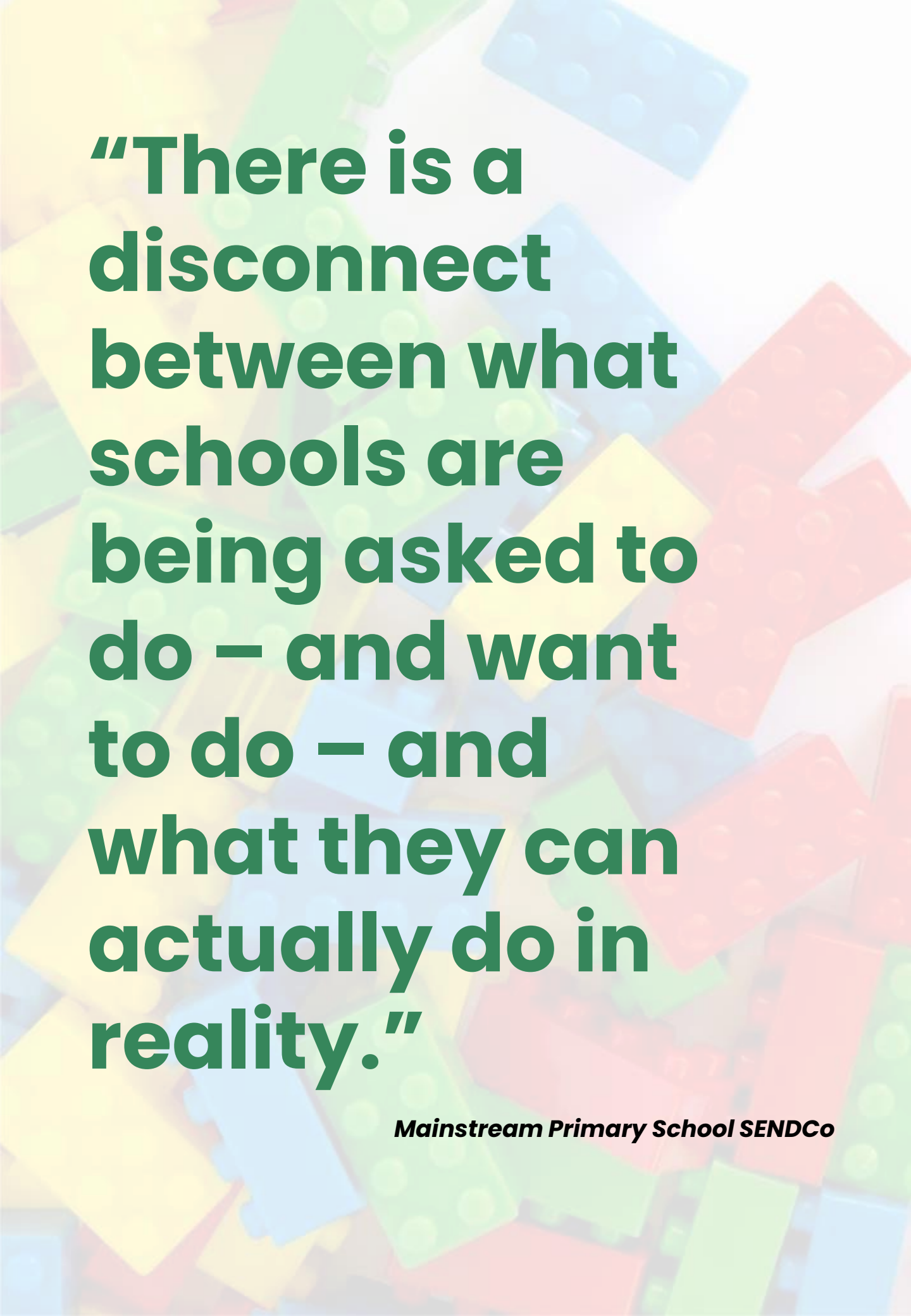
***"Years of under funding
has cost our children an
education."***

***Terry, dad of a 10 year old
in specialist provision***

4 What families say

- More regular contact with parents when there is an EHCP.
- SEND funding could come direct from the Treasury instead of via hardpressed councils.
- More mandatory training in SEND for all schools and all staff.
- More specialist SEN settings.
- More funding for schools in general so they can cater for all children.
- Introduce more outreach SEN support.
- Introduce an official accreditation system for advocacy bodies to prevent vulnerable families being ripped off by people seeking to benefit from the complex system.
- Health visitors to help advise and implement early intervention.
- More accountability throughout the system.
- Introduce one page profiles in mainstream on top of EHCP as children move class into high school. This would be about needs, barriers, what helps etc.
- Cut down the length of paperwork/forms as well as the sheer number of them.
- Introduce better informative technology to enable easier sharing of records and reports between families, schools, health services and councils, cutting down on paperwork.
- Assessment process is too rigid and is failing to recognise achievement of every child.
- Improved respite services.
- More SEND parks and playgrounds in communities.
- Greater power to devolve decision making for individuals in schools to develop bespoke solutions and support.

There are common themes raised by families, both about what isn't working and what they would like to see introduced, from points about the complex referral and diagnosis process beset by delays, to a desire for more funding and training for our schools. I was struck by how similar the issues are to those raised by school staff, as the following pages show.



“There is a disconnect between what schools are being asked to do – and want to do – and what they can actually do in reality.”

Mainstream Primary School SENDCo

5. What our schools say

Early intervention, diagnosis and EHCPs

Primary Schools are desperate for more early intervention in pre-school years to help identify any potential additional needs as soon as possible. Like families, schools also say the EHCP and diagnosis process is needlessly complex, repetitive and slow.

They feel that parents are increasingly seeing EHCPs as the only way to get support for their child, and schools say that with other changes to the system including earlier and more timely diagnosis they would be able to offer more children the support and adaptations they need and so reducing EHCP demand.

Schools are understandably concerned about the uplift in requests and diagnoses of certain conditions and the subsequent rise in EHCPs, but they are equally clear that the system is not fit for purpose even if the number of referrals dropped.

Most SENDCo's I spoke with feel they are caught in an impossible position because – rightly – families of children with an EHCP expect and deserve a certain level of support, but too often the school simply doesn't have the resources to consistently provide what families expect. In the words of one Primary SENDCo: ***“EHCPs aren't worth the paper they're written on if the funding doesn't come with it.”***

Many also say health services aren't involved enough (one Primary School SENDCo said: ***“The word ‘health’ is in there [on EHCPs] but you try and get anyone from health to help or come out and see pupils!”***). This was a point also made by families.



5. What our schools say

Funding, staffing and training

Every school I spoke with is facing difficult choices every year because of inadequate funding. They tell me that rising costs and demand is placing increasing pressure on them, and after years of cuts they are already down to the bare bones.

Every school I spoke with is vocal about the importance of teaching assistants. One Primary School doesn't have a single TA who isn't linked to a high-needs child, leaving other children on the SEN register without support. Some schools have had to make TA's redundant in the last decade due to funding cuts, and this is a constant pressure on every school right now and they see no sign of that changing. I spoke to one school which lost its cleaner rather than a TA, and another which incredibly made its deputy headteacher role redundant rather than lose more TAs.

Schools welcome the government commitment to improving pay and conditions for teaching assistants but are concerned that they will be expected to pick up the increase in pay, in effect solving one problem but causing schools another.

Schools are supportive of Pupil Premium and would like certainty about its future, but warn that it shouldn't be seen as a reliable source of SEN funding: rising numbers of SEN pupils across the board is causing growing pressure for all schools but particularly for those schools with low PP numbers.

Schools would welcome more training for all staff on SEND both as part of the requirement for newly qualified teachers and teaching assistants and for existing staff.



5. What our schools say

Inclusivity, curriculum and assessment

Teachers are doing all they can to help every child access as broad a curriculum as possible in a way that suits them and their needs, and I have seen many excellent examples of schools moving heaven and earth to give every child the opportunity to thrive. Schools want to be inclusive, but as one SENDCo put it: *"We can't be truly inclusive if we don't have the resources."*

The pressures of a packed curriculum and Ofsted expectations were raised by many schools, as were the pressures of Year 6 SATs on all pupils and not just those with SEND – though most were rightly proud of the way they try to support pupils through it. One Secondary School SENDCo told me: ***"You've just got to be brave. Don't worry about your data – it's about being truly inclusive."***

Inconsistencies and systems not talking to one another

Families suggested better use of technology to more easily share data and updates, and this is also a key ask for schools. Every SENDCo I spoke with told me they spend a huge amount of their time chasing applications with others. In the words of one Primary School Deputy Headteacher: ***"I can track a pizza from JustEat more easily than I can track an application for a diagnosis or pupil funding. How can that be right?"***

One Primary Headteacher made the point that schools use CPOMS for safeguarding, but no such system exists for schools to track and submit referrals. Schools which take pupils from various boroughs also made the point that funding measures and referral systems vary from local authority to local authority.



6. Next steps

This report will be shared with Ministers in the Department for Education, and I hope it will help to inform the forthcoming government White Paper on schools and SEND reform.

The publication of that White Paper will not be the end of the debate nor will it be the last chance for us to have our voices heard in parliament. I urge anyone with an interest in this subject to continue to get in touch and to share your views and experiences with me, and I will continue to do all I can to raise it at the highest levels.

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