

SEND **IN RURAL ENGLAND**

Prepared By:

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In response to:

SEND reform: putting children and young people first

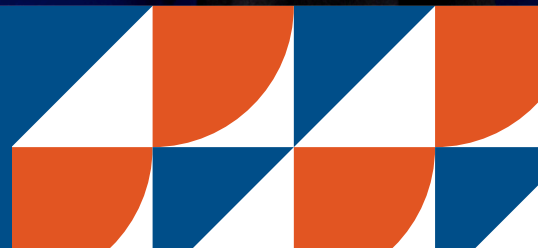


TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	Introduction from Ben Goldsborough MP	3	Executive Summary
4	Parent and Guardian findings	6	Teacher and Education Professional Findings
8	Impact of Rurality on Education	10	Conclusion



INTRODUCTION

As the Member of Parliament for South Norfolk, I have spent many months listening to parents, teachers, teaching assistants, school leaders and young people about the pressures facing Special Educational Needs and Disabilities provision in Norfolk. While there is broad agreement that the current system requires reform, there is also a deep and understandable anxiety that the Government's proposed changes risk weakening support before the underlying causes of the crisis have been addressed.

For rural counties such as Norfolk, these challenges are particularly acute. National education policy is too often designed around assumptions that simply do not reflect the realities of rural England. Our children travel longer distances to school, our specialist provision is spread thinly across large geographical areas and our schools frequently struggle to recruit and retain staff. Parents in South Norfolk repeatedly told me that accessing appropriate SEND provision can feel like a postcode lottery, particularly for those living in villages where transport links are poor and specialist services are limited.

Alongside these structural challenges, Norfolk has faced the consequences of the Safety Valve system, which many parents and education professionals believe has created a culture where cost control has too often taken precedence over early intervention and meaningful support. Families described feeling forced into confrontation with the Local Authority simply to secure basic provision for their children. One parent stated that schools and councils "push back at parents, not believing us, stalling us and gaslighting us for years to hope we go away". Another described SEND parents as feeling "gaslit" by reforms that appear to reduce rights while failing to address the shortages in funding and specialist support that underpin the current crisis.

Education professionals across South Norfolk also expressed frustration that they are increasingly expected to meet highly complex needs within mainstream settings while staffing levels, budgets and specialist support remain under enormous pressure. Teachers repeatedly spoke about the widening gap between expectations and resources. One professional summarised the issue succinctly by stating that "schools are already under considerable pressure and without meaningful increases in funding, staffing and specialist training, they will not be able to meet the needs of children with SEND effectively".

At the same time, this report also highlights examples of innovation and optimism. Parents and professionals alike support earlier intervention, better staff training and genuinely inclusive practice. However, inclusion must be properly understood. It cannot simply mean placing more children into mainstream classrooms without the staffing, flexibility and support required for them to thrive.

This report brings together the experiences of families and education professionals across South Norfolk in response to the Government's Education White Paper consultation. It seeks not only to identify the problems within the current system, but also to offer constructive proposals for how SEND provision can be strengthened in rural communities.

Children with SEND deserve more than a bureaucratic process that forces families into conflict. They deserve a system built around dignity, flexibility and trust, with policy designed around their individual needs rather than administrative convenience.



Ben Goldsborough, Member of Parliament for South Norfolk

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws together evidence gathered from a South Norfolk SEND survey alongside a dedicated SEND roundtable discussion attended by teachers, school leaders and further education professionals from across Norfolk. The evidence demonstrates overwhelming agreement that reform of the SEND system is necessary, but equally strong concern that structural reform without substantial investment risks worsening the existing crisis.

Parents repeatedly described a system that they believe has become adversarial and exhausting. Several respondents detailed years spent fighting for support, often through tribunals, before their children's needs were properly recognised. One parent stated that "it took me four years to get an EHCP", despite professional assessments later demonstrating that their child required "high level support". Another warned that "support remains both accessible and enforceable" only because legal protections currently exist through tribunals and Education, Health and Care Plans.

A major theme throughout both the survey and roundtable discussions was the growing pressure on mainstream schools. Education professionals reported rapidly increasing numbers of pupils requiring SEND support, with one South Norfolk school leader noting that over 30% of Year 7 pupils in their setting had SEND needs, substantially above national averages. At the same time, professionals described shrinking budgets, growing class sizes and worsening recruitment problems, particularly amongst teaching assistants and learning support staff.

There was broad support for some aspects of the Government's proposals, particularly around earlier intervention, improved staff training and more inclusive educational environments. However, respondents consistently argued that inclusion cannot be delivered through rhetoric alone. One survey response stated that "you can't just say mainstream schools will suddenly be inclusive", while another warned that "segregating children in separate units is not inclusion". Parents repeatedly stressed that different children require different environments and that specialist provision must remain available where necessary.

The evidence also highlights the specific impact of rurality on education in Norfolk. Long travel distances, cross county bureaucracy, transport difficulties and recruitment shortages all place additional pressure on families and schools. Stakeholders argued strongly that national policy continues to underestimate the practical realities of delivering SEND provision across large rural counties.

Finally, this report proposes a new rural SEND model centred around village primary schools. Rather than forcing children with SEND into large secondary environments that may not meet their needs, rural primaries with spare capacity could be supported to provide extended year group provision, allowing some pupils to remain within smaller and more familiar educational settings for longer. Such a model would help maintain the viability of rural schools while also providing SEND pupils with smaller class sizes, stronger community links and a more stable learning environment.

PARENT AND GUARDIAN FINDINGS

The survey responses received from parents and guardians across South Norfolk reveal a deep sense of frustration with the current SEND system, but also a strong determination to protect the rights and dignity of children with additional needs. Many parents described their experiences in highly emotional terms, often reflecting years of exhaustion, stress and conflict before appropriate support was secured.

One of the clearest themes throughout the responses was the widespread perception that families are forced into adversarial relationships with schools and Local Authorities. Parents repeatedly described feeling disbelieved or dismissed when attempting to secure support for their children. One respondent stated that councils and schools were “stalling us and gaslighting us for years to hope we go away”, while another argued that “the tribunal process must stay, it is the lifeline we have when we are not believed”. These experiences have contributed to a collapse in trust between many families and the wider SEND system.

Several parents expressed concern that the Government’s reforms appear focused on reducing EHCPs and tribunals rather than addressing the underlying causes of rising demand. Respondents consistently argued that the SEND crisis is fundamentally rooted in a lack of funding, staffing and specialist provision. One parent wrote that “the problem wasn’t that the current SEND system was broken, it was that the schools and councils don’t have enough money or staff”. Another respondent warned that “funding announced is way insufficient”, noting that the equivalent funding increase for schools “won’t even fund a full time TA”.

Parents also repeatedly raised concerns about the impact of mainstream environments on children with SEND. While there was broad support for inclusive education in principle, many respondents stressed that inclusion must be meaningful and personalised rather than ideological. One parent stated that “different children need different school environments and ethos”, while another warned that “some children just need a specialist school to be able to thrive”. Respondents consistently argued that inclusion cannot simply mean placing children into larger classrooms without the staffing and flexibility necessary to support them.

A recurring concern involved the perceived move away from individualised support towards more standardised provision. Parents feared that reforms could reduce choice and weaken legal protections without ensuring that schools are properly equipped to meet complex needs. One survey response warned that “there is a risk that children whose needs are complex but do not fit neatly into specialist provision may fall through the gaps”. Another parent expressed concern that “children are not left without the provision they need simply because they do not meet stricter thresholds”.

At the same time, respondents supported several aspects of the White Paper proposals, particularly around earlier intervention and improved staff training. One contributor stated that schools need to “adapt practices, adapt the teaching environments and improve their flexibility to meet the needs of children and young people”. Another argued for a greater emphasis on speech, language, communication and emotional development in the early years, suggesting that “children will be more likely ready and able for academic learning at age seven”.

Many parents also highlighted the importance of recognising neurodiversity earlier and more effectively. Survey responses demonstrated strong support for earlier diagnosis, better emotional support and more flexible teaching methods. However, respondents stressed repeatedly that reforms cannot succeed without proper investment in staff, smaller class sizes and specialist support.

Underlying all of these concerns was a broader fear that SEND reform is becoming overly focused on administrative efficiency rather than outcomes for children. Parents consistently returned to the principle that fairness does not mean treating every child identically. As one respondent observed, “Labour are going for equality rather than equity and as a SEND parent I want equity particularly in terms of fair outcomes”.



TEACHER AND EDUCATION PROFESSIONAL FINDINGS

The South Norfolk SEND roundtable brought together professionals from mainstream secondary schools, independent education and further education settings. The discussion revealed a profession under enormous strain but also deeply committed to supporting children with SEND despite worsening pressures.

Education professionals consistently described a dramatic increase in the number and complexity of pupils requiring support. One participant noted that over 30% of their Year 7 cohort were identified as having SEND needs, far above national averages. Teachers explained that schools are now supporting a much broader range of needs within mainstream settings, including increasing levels of neurodiversity, mental health difficulties and communication challenges.

Professionals also highlighted the growing disconnect between expectations placed upon schools and the resources available to deliver them. A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the role of teaching assistants and learning support staff, who participants repeatedly described as undervalued and underpaid despite being central to inclusive education. One school leader stated plainly that they would “like to see LSAs and TAs paid their worth”, while another emphasised that low pay was making recruitment increasingly difficult.

Class sizes were another major concern. Participants argued that genuine inclusion becomes substantially harder when schools are forced to increase pupil numbers per class in response to financial pressures. One school representative explained that staffing reductions had forced class sizes to increase from 24 pupils to 31 pupils, significantly affecting their ability to provide effective SEND support.

Professionals expressed mixed views regarding the White Paper proposals themselves. While there was support for earlier intervention and more joined up approaches, many participants questioned whether the proposed reforms would meaningfully improve outcomes without substantial investment. One contributor observed that schools are “already doing a lot of what is suggested”, including tiered support systems and questioned whether the reforms would create significant change in practice.

There was also concern about the increasing administrative burden associated with SEND provision. Professionals warned that schools and colleges already spend large amounts of time navigating complex paperwork and multiple Local Authority systems. This issue is particularly acute in South Norfolk, where many schools work across both Norfolk and Suffolk. One participant described the existence of “two kinds of paperwork for two authorities” as “a huge problem”, while another warned that the process of transitioning to new systems could divert resources away from direct support for children.

The roundtable also highlighted concerns regarding the sustainability of rural schools and local sixth forms. Participants emphasised the importance of village schools as anchors within rural communities and warned that closures or reductions in local provision could significantly affect SEND pupils, many of whom rely heavily on familiarity, stability and shorter travel distances.

Further Education providers stressed that post-16 SEND provision is too often overlooked within national policy. One participant highlighted that approximately 34% of students with EHCPs became Not in Education, Employment or Training during the previous year, demonstrating the importance of transition support and long term planning.



THE IMPACT OF RURALITY ON EDUCATION

The experiences shared throughout this consultation make clear that rurality is not simply a background factor within education policy. In counties such as Norfolk, rurality fundamentally shapes the delivery of SEND provision and significantly affects educational outcomes.

One of the most immediate challenges facing rural families is transport. Children with SEND frequently travel substantial distances to access appropriate provision, particularly where specialist services are concentrated in larger towns or cities. For many pupils, lengthy daily journeys are not simply inconvenient but actively harmful, especially for children with sensory sensitivities, anxiety or communication difficulties. Norfolk County Council operates one of the largest SEND transport systems in the country due to the dispersed nature of provision across rural communities.

Recruitment and retention pressures are also significantly more severe in rural areas. Norfolk schools have consistently reported difficulties recruiting specialist staff, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and teaching assistants. Rural isolation, limited public transport and increased travel costs all contribute to workforce shortages. These problems are compounded by low pay for teaching assistants and support staff, an issue repeatedly raised throughout both the survey and roundtable discussions.

At the same time, rural schools themselves face growing financial pressures. Village primary schools are often operating close to minimum viable numbers, despite playing a critical role within their communities. Education professionals stressed that these schools provide stability, continuity and familiarity for many vulnerable pupils. However, falling rolls and funding pressures increasingly threaten their sustainability.

It is within this context that South Norfolk has the opportunity to pioneer a new rural SEND model. Rather than forcing children with SEND into large secondary school environments that may not suit their needs, rural primary schools with spare capacity could be supported to provide extended provision for pupils who would benefit from remaining within smaller educational settings for longer.

Under such a model, some pupils with SEND could remain attached to their primary setting beyond the traditional Year 6 transition point, continuing to access appropriately adapted learning within smaller class sizes and familiar surroundings. Specialist teachers and outreach staff could work across clusters of village schools, allowing provision to remain locally rooted while ensuring educational standards are maintained.

This approach could deliver multiple benefits simultaneously. For SEND pupils, it would provide continuity, reduced anxiety and access to smaller class sizes within familiar community environments. For families, it would reduce transport pressures and allow children to remain connected to local support networks. For rural schools, it would help maintain pupil numbers and improve long term financial viability.

Importantly, such a proposal would not replace specialist schools or mainstream secondary provision entirely. Instead, it would create a more flexible middle pathway for pupils whose needs are not best met within large secondary environments but who may also not require full specialist placements.

Rural areas require rural solutions. National SEND policy must move beyond one size fits all assumptions and recognise that smaller community based provision can often deliver better outcomes for children with additional needs.



CONCLUSIONS

The evidence gathered across South Norfolk demonstrates that the SEND crisis is not the result of a single failure, but rather the cumulative effect of underinvestment, rising need, workforce shortages and a system that too often forces families into conflict rather than partnership.

Parents and professionals alike support the principle of reform. There is broad agreement around the importance of earlier intervention, improved staff training and more inclusive educational environments. However, there is also deep concern that the Government's proposals risk weakening legal protections before schools and Local Authorities are equipped to provide the support children require.

The central lesson from South Norfolk is that meaningful reform cannot be delivered through structural change alone. Schools require sustained investment, smaller class sizes, improved specialist provision and a workforce that is properly valued and supported. Teaching assistants and learning support staff are essential to inclusive education and must be recognised as such.

This report also demonstrates that rural England requires bespoke SEND policy solutions. Counties such as Norfolk face unique challenges linked to geography, transport, recruitment and school organisation. National policy must better reflect these realities rather than assuming that urban models can simply be replicated across rural communities.

The proposal to develop enhanced SEND provision through rural primary schools represents one possible path forward. By using spare capacity within village schools to create smaller, community based provision for pupils who would struggle within large secondary environments, Norfolk could simultaneously strengthen rural schools and improve outcomes for children with SEND.

Ultimately, the experiences shared throughout this consultation point towards a simple but important conclusion. Families do not want conflict. Teachers do not want bureaucracy. Children do not want systems designed around budgets and thresholds. What communities across South Norfolk want is a SEND system built around trust, flexibility and dignity, with decisions driven by the needs of children rather than administrative convenience.

That must remain the central test for any future reform.