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A young girl with Down syndrome is sitting at a table, looking down at a piece of paper. She has brown hair with yellow flower clips and is wearing a white shirt with colorful polka dots. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

From Crisis to Innovation: Rethinking EHCPs for a Better Future

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Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) are crucial for supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) across the UK.

Introduction

In the last five years, demand for these plans has surged, placing the system under immense strain. Local authorities face rising caseloads, funding pressures, and workforce shortages, while families often experience long delays and adversarial battles to secure support.

The EHCP system is at breaking point. Demand has surged, delays are growing, and families and professionals alike are struggling with a process that isn't keeping up. Yet, there is a way forward. This report not only examines the scale of the challenge but also highlights a game-changing innovation - **EHCP Plus** - that is already helping local authorities manage rising demand while improving outcomes for children. The time for incremental change is over; real transformation is needed now.

A Surge in EHCP Demand Across the UK



Over the past five years, the demand for Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) has soared across the UK, placing unprecedented pressure on local authorities, schools, and professionals.



140%

As of January 2024, England had about 576,000 children and young people with EHCPs – a 140% increase since 2015. The rise in 2023 alone was the highest in six years, with 84,428 new EHCPs issued (a 26.6% increase) and 138,200 initial requests made (up 20.8%).

Other parts of the UK report similar trends:

- **Northern Ireland:** SEN statements (the EHCP equivalent) rose 50% in five years, with 8% of pupils now requiring a statement, double the proportion in 2005.
- **Scotland:** The number of pupils identified with Additional Support Needs (ASN) has doubled over the past decade, now covering over 40% of students (around 259,000 in 2023). Yet, the number receiving legally binding Co-ordinated Support Plans (CSPs) has fallen by 61%, raising concerns about gaps in formal support.
- **Wales:** The shift to Individual Development Plans (IDPs) under the 2021 Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reforms is expanding the number of children entitled to statutory plans, increasing workload and transitional challenges.



Backlogs, Delays, and Tribunal Cases

Despite this rising demand, capacity has failed to keep pace, leading to severe delays and growing backlogs:



In England, only 50% of new EHCPs were issued within the statutory 20-week deadline in 2023 (down from 60% in 2018–2021). Over 20,000 children had waited beyond the limit, and some families endured delays of over a year.



Northern Ireland's 26-week target for SEN statements is routinely breached due to staff shortages, leaving families stuck in a “paperwork bottleneck” while children miss appropriate placements.



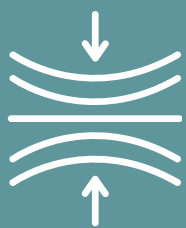
Scotland's CSPs—meant to provide legal guarantees for children with complex needs—have plummeted in number, despite record-high ASN identification.



Wales, transitioning to the new IDP system, faces significant inconsistencies, with schools and councils struggling to keep up with the reforms.

These delays have led to a surge in legal disputes. Parents are increasingly appealing EHCP decisions, with SEND Tribunal cases in England rising from 6,000 in 2018 to 15,600 in 2023—a 160% increase.

In the 2023/24 academic year alone, over 21,000 appeals were registered, 55% more than the previous year. Crucially, parents win 95–98% of cases, highlighting that many EHCP refusals or delays are unlawful, fuelling a costly and adversarial process for families and councils alike.



Regional Pressures and Systemic Strain

The impact of EHCP demand varies across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, but the underlying challenges are consistent: underfunding, workforce shortages, and system strain.

- **England:** EHCP demand has risen 11% in the past year alone, with one in 20 pupils (5%) now requiring an EHCP. High Needs budgets are overstretched, and the Local Government Association (LGA) warns that many councils face “huge pressure” and unsustainable SEND deficits. Despite this, over 90% of tribunal cases go against local authorities, showing a system struggling to deliver timely and lawful support.
- **Northern Ireland:** The Education Authority (EA) reports that specialist workforce shortages and a decade of underinvestment have led to delays beyond six months in many cases. Special schools are at capacity, and demand continues to outstrip available places, prompting urgent calls for reform.
- **Scotland:** ASN identification is at record levels (34–40% of pupils), yet legally binding CSPs—intended for children with complex, multi-agency needs—have plummeted, covering just 0.4% of ASN pupils. This reflects a shift towards informal support but raises concerns about accountability and access to legally enforceable plans.
- **Wales:** The move to IDPs for all ALN learners (ages 0–25) is a bold inclusion reform, but the rollout has been uneven, with delays, workforce shortages, and disputes over responsibilities between schools and local authorities.

The Bigger Picture: A System in Urgent Need of Reform

Across the UK, the EHCP system is at a breaking point. Demand is rising sharply, yet funding, workforce capacity, and processes remain outdated and inefficient.

The consequences are clear:



Children waiting too long for support



Overwhelmed professionals struggling to keep up



Families forced into costly and stressful legal battles

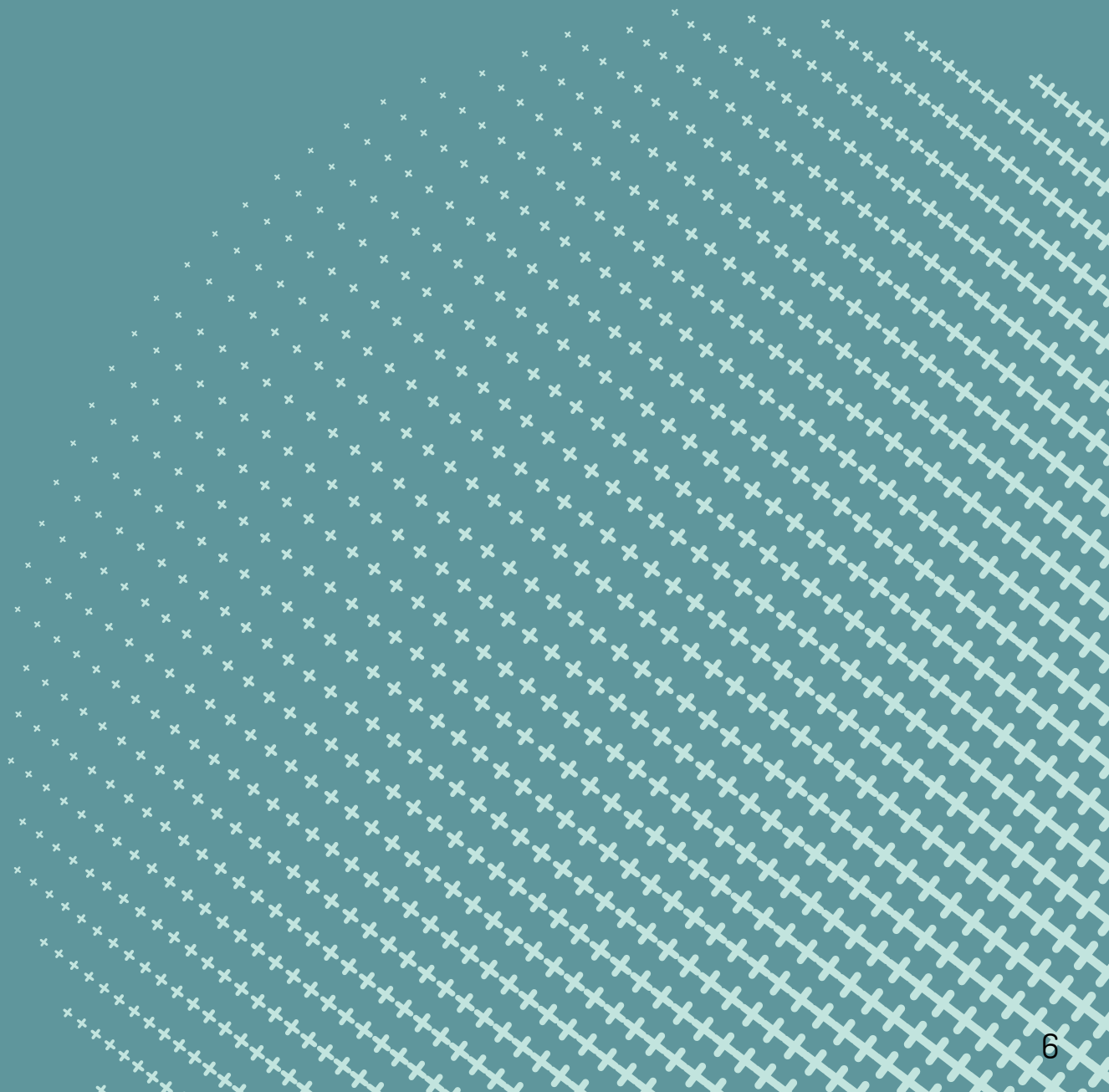


Local authorities facing mounting deficits

To break this cycle, solutions must focus on reducing bureaucracy, increasing efficiency, and ensuring children get the support they need – on time. Emerging technologies like EHCP Plus offer a way forward by freeing up staff, cutting delays, and improving plan quality, helping local authorities and schools manage the surge in demand without adding pressure to overstretched teams.

With EHCP numbers set to rise even further, modernising the system is no longer optional – it's essential. The good news? Local authorities don't have to solve this alone. **EHCP Plus** is already helping councils streamline processes, reduce backlogs, and free up staff to focus on supporting children.

Key Challenges Impacting EHCP Delivery



Funding Shortfalls



A persistent theme is the mismatch between needs and funding. High-needs education budgets across the UK have not kept pace with the explosion in EHCPs and equivalent plans. In England, the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee note that even after emergency injections, many local authorities face unsustainable deficits on their SEND budgets.



The LGA has called for government to write off these deficits and reform funding, warning that without relief the system is “on the brink of collapse.” Northern Ireland’s Education Authority likewise reports that rising statement numbers, coupled with a decade of real-term cuts, have left NI spending hundreds of pounds less per pupil than England/Scotland, creating huge pressure.

In Wales and Scotland, funding for ALN/ASN is largely folded into overall school budgets, and stakeholders worry that without dedicated increases, the broader inclusion agenda will falter.

The bottom line is that demand is outpacing resources. More children need support, but councils struggle with limited funding – leading to tough choices, stretched services, or unlawful delays. This funding gap also contributes to variation by region: some areas invest more in SEND services, while others ration support, causing a “postcode lottery” in EHCP experiences.

Workforce Shortages

A critical limiting factor has been the shortage of qualified professionals to carry out assessments and deliver support. One acute example is the national shortage of Educational Psychologists (EPs). EPs are essential for EHCP needs assessments, yet many councils simply cannot recruit enough of them. The Local Government Ombudsman found this shortage “has been 10 years in the making” and is now having a “profound impact” on councils’ ability to complete EHCPs.

Surrey County Council, for instance, disclosed a backlog of around 1,000 EHCP assessments waiting for EP input, blaming the lack of available specialists. In that case, a child waited 37 weeks for an EP report that should take 6 weeks – a scenario echoed in many areas.

Beyond psychologists, there are shortfalls in therapists, specialist teachers, and SEND caseworkers. Many local authority SEND teams struggle to retain staff due to high workloads and burnout. Schools, too, face workforce pressures: special schools and inclusion units require skilled teachers and support staff, but recruitment and retention are challenging given the intensity of need.





Increasing Complexity of Needs

The nature of SEND needs has also become more complex and multi-faceted, adding to the challenge. Across the UK, there are more children with profound autism, mental health difficulties, and multiple disabilities entering the system than in years past. The DfE reports “large increases in certain needs, including Autistic Spectrum Disorders” driving EHCP demand. Autism is now the most common primary need for new EHCPs in England, reflecting better awareness and diagnosis, but also requiring highly individualised support.

Schools are reporting rises in children with social, emotional, and mental health issues, speech and language disorders, and other complex needs that require coordinated intervention. The severity of needs in special schools has also increased, with some now operating at capacity and struggling to meet demand.

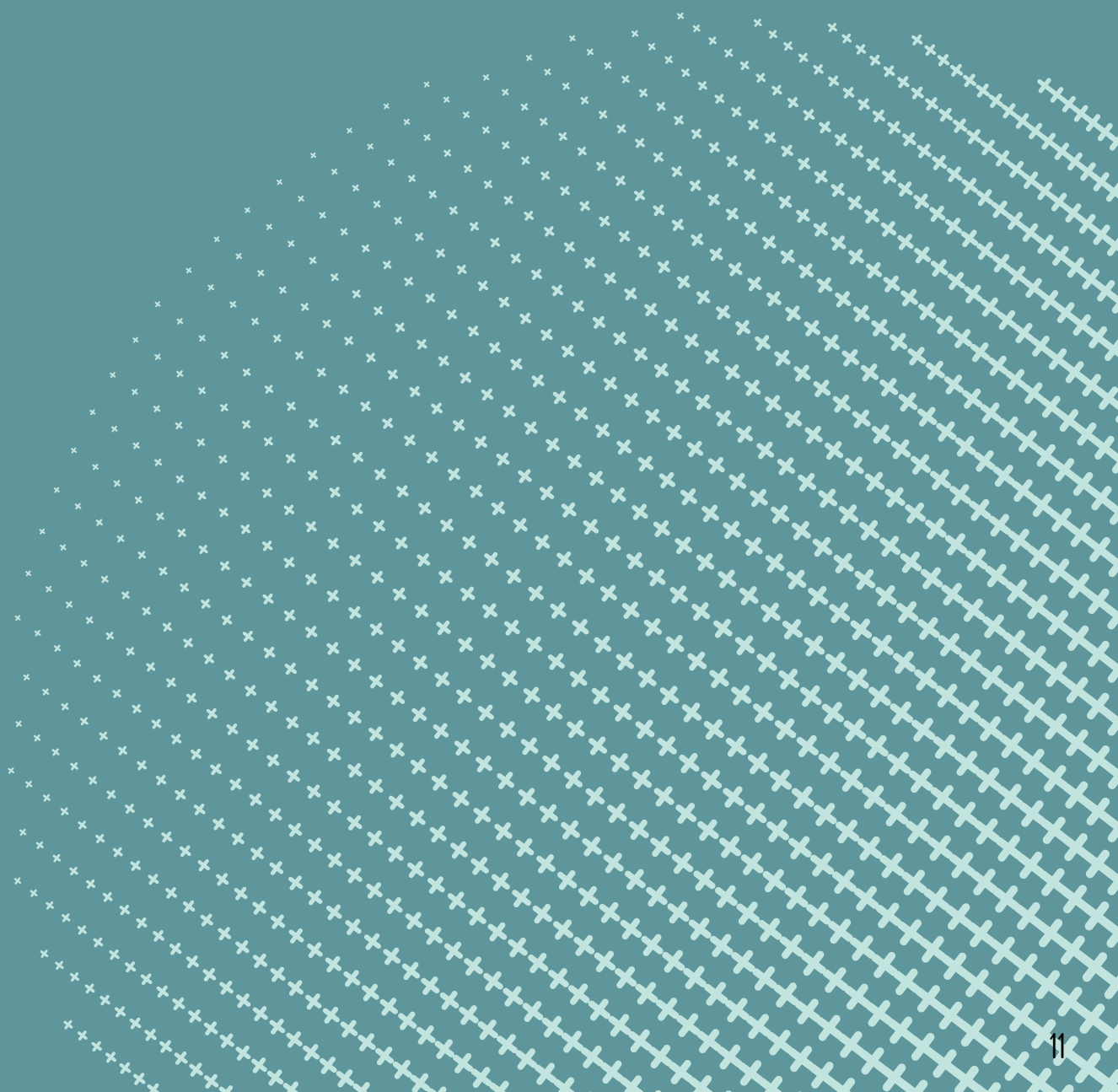
Adversarial System and Legal Disputes



The percentage of EHCP decisions ending in a tribunal appeal rose from 1.6% in 2018 to 2.5% in 2023. Over 95% of tribunal rulings favour parents, suggesting that local authorities frequently concede or lose cases due to unlawful denials or delays. This adversarial dynamic is costly for councils and stressful for families. Rising legal disputes and complaints are both a symptom and a cause of system strain: they indicate unmet needs and procedural failures while consuming limited resources that could otherwise go into supporting children.



Stakeholder Perspectives on EHCP Challenges



Local Authorities



Council leaders and Directors of Children's Services have been vocal about the unsustainable pressure the EHCP system is placing on local authorities. The Local Government Association has called the current situation "huge pressure" and a reminder that councils are struggling to cope. Many LAs are facing multi-million pound high-needs budget deficits after years of rising demand; in England, dozens of councils have cumulative SEND overspends in the tens of millions, temporarily covered by government accounting changes. An LGA representative urged that whichever government is in charge "must bring forward proposals without delay to reform the SEND system" – including more support for mainstream inclusion and writing off deficits.

Local authorities stress that they are committed to supporting every child, but they are constrained by funding and workforce. The Chief Executive of the LGO (Ombudsman) acknowledged that many councils are doing their best yet falling short due to systemic issues: "we do have some sympathy for [councils'] recruitment and capacity problems...however, councils have a clear obligation to meet statutory timescales." This captures the dilemma for LAs – they are legally responsible for EHCPs but feel hamstrung by factors beyond their immediate control. Councils also point out that the 2014 reforms expanded the age range (to 0–25) and raised expectations, but came without commensurate long-term funding or training. In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority similarly highlights that demand growth without sustainable funding is "extremely challenging" and that current service levels "have not been matched by a sustainable budget."

In summary, local authorities are calling for urgent policy and funding solutions to help them manage the EHCP system – they see innovation and reform as necessary to break out of the vicious cycle of rising demand, insufficient resources, and non-compliance.

School Leaders



Headteachers and school leadership teams are also feeling the strain, both in special schools and mainstream settings. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) warned that failure to fund SEND properly has “brought the whole SEND system to the brink of collapse,” with schools unable to afford the costs of provision and a lack of special school places.



School leaders see first-hand the impact on children when support is delayed – increasing exclusions, stress on teachers, and learning disruptions. Many mainstream headteachers are committed to inclusion but worry about the trade-offs: without additional staffing or training, enrolling more high-need pupils can mean less attention for others, and potentially lower exam performance (since accountability measures don't fully credit inclusive practices). This can create a disincentive for schools to be welcoming to SEND pupils, a point noted by the Public Accounts Committee: there are “few incentives for schools to be inclusive” under current accountability, and some schools feel others are “not accepting their share” of children with SEND.



Special school heads, on the other hand, report operating at capacity or over-capacity, sometimes in aging facilities not designed for today's levels of complex needs. In Northern Ireland, principals of special schools have pointed out they now serve far more children than they were built for, with more severe needs, leading to concerns about quality of care. Workforce stress is another key issue: a shortage of SEND teaching assistants, therapists, and SENCOs means schools struggle to fulfil EHCP requirements. The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) has lobbied for more funding to employ specialist staff and for the government to address EP shortages so that schools can get timely advice.

Overall, school leaders' perspective is that schools are doing all they can to support SEND pupils, but they need systemic support (funding, training, external services) to meet the rising complexity and volume of need. They often welcome tools that can streamline bureaucracy or provide expertise, as long as those tools are reliable and enhance – not replace – human professional judgment in supporting students.



Parents and Families



Parents of children with SEND have been at the centre of the EHCP crisis – often as the most passionate advocates for change. Many parents describe the process of securing an EHCP as an uphill battle. As demand has risen, families frequently encounter long delays, inadequate assessments, or pushback on providing support, which forces them to become “warriors” for their child’s rights. The high success rate of tribunal appeals (well over 95% in favour of parents) is telling – it indicates that parents are usually justified in challenging decisions.

But going to tribunal takes time, money, and emotional energy that many families find draining. Advocacy groups (like Special Needs Jungle in England, or the Scottish ASN Parents groups) share stories of parents waiting a year or more for a plan, or spending thousands on independent reports to evidence their child’s needs. A recent FOI in England revealed thousands of children waiting beyond statutory deadlines for EHCPs, confirming what many frustrated parents already knew. In areas like Surrey, delays led one family to complain to the Ombudsman after their daughter waited nine months for an EHCP – her mother reported the child became distressed having to attend unsuitable school trial days in the interim.



In Scotland, parent coalitions are “deeply concerned” that so few children have CSPs now, fearing their kids are missing out on support and legal protections. Parents consistently call for greater accountability and consistency in the system: they want clear communication, adherence to legal timeframes, and a truly child-centred approach rather than feeling like they must fight every step.

On a positive note, when EHCPs (or equivalents) work as intended, families do acknowledge the difference – in the DfE’s large survey a few years ago, a majority of parents agreed that the EHCP had begun to make a positive difference for their child. What parents desire is a system where such positive outcomes are achieved without undue delay or dispute.

Many parent-led organisations have also expressed cautious optimism about innovations that could speed up processes (as long as quality is maintained) and about the government’s recent focus on improving SEND systems. In essence, families are eager for solutions – they are perhaps the most motivated stakeholders to see EHCP challenges addressed, because their children’s futures depend on it.



EHCP Plus: An Innovative Solution to EHCP Challenges

Amid the systemic challenges facing EHCP delivery, **EHCP Plus** has emerged as a promising solution to transform how plans are produced and managed. **EHCP Plus** is an AI-powered tool designed to reduce administrative bottlenecks and improve plan quality. Co-developed by public sector consultants and technology partners in collaboration with local authority SEND teams, **EHCP Plus** uses generative AI to draft EHCPs in a fraction of the time it takes using traditional methods.

The tool works by securely processing all assessment reports and advice documents for a child – including educational psychology reports, therapist recommendations, and teacher observations – and then generating a first draft of the EHCP that a caseworker can review and refine. This draft includes the child's needs, outcomes, and proposed support, synthesised from the evidence in a clear, structured format.

Efficiency Gains



By automating the most time-consuming aspects of plan writing, **EHCP Plus** frees up significant staff time. On average, councils piloting **EHCP Plus** report saving about 5–6 hours of staff time per plan. Instead of caseworkers spending hours collating information and drafting sections manually, the AI produces a high-quality first draft within minutes.



At scale, these time savings add up dramatically. Nationally, if all EHCPs produced in a single year used **EHCP Plus**, it could free tens of thousands of working days for professionals, allowing them to focus on case management and direct support for families.



For stretched SEND departments, this efficiency is game-changing. It directly tackles the backlog problem by allowing more plans to be completed in less time. Faster drafting also improves compliance with the 20-week statutory deadline, making it easier for local authorities to meet their legal obligations and reduce delays that impact families.

Consistency and Quality



Beyond speed, **EHCP Plus** enhances the consistency and quality of plans. The tool utilises best-practice examples and national SEND legislation, ensuring that every draft aligns with legal requirements and includes all key sections.

By analysing all input documents, the AI can sometimes highlight key details or connections that might be missed in a rushed manual process. Pilot authorities have reported that AI-generated plans provide a strong foundation, which staff can then personalise further.

The platform also allows for local customisation, meaning councils can tailor the AI-generated drafts to their own templates and preferences. The system is able to produce drafts in the preferred style and format, reducing the need for repeated manual adjustments. This helps caseworkers maintain a high standard of accuracy and clarity, leading to better plans and fewer disputes over unclear or incomplete provisions.

Focus on Children, Not Paperwork



Perhaps the most important benefit is that **EHCP Plus** shifts professional time away from paperwork and back to supporting children and families. Caseworkers and SEND coordinators can spend the hours saved on direct engagement – meeting with parents, supporting young people, and working with schools to implement effective support.



Instead of being overwhelmed by paperwork, professionals can focus on what truly matters – making a meaningful impact on the lives of children and young people with SEND. This shift also helps rebuild trust and collaboration with families, as caseworkers become more responsive and available, rather than stuck behind a desk managing administrative tasks.



By ensuring that EHCPs are produced more efficiently and accurately, **EHCP Plus** reduces frustration among parents and professionals alike. Meeting deadlines, providing clearer plans, and reducing delays means families feel more supported, and the system functions more effectively for everyone involved.

Pilot Results and Case Studies

EHCP Plus is already delivering significant impact in local authorities using the system. Pilots conducted with multiple councils have shown:



6+ hours saved per plan on drafting and admin tasks



Improved compliance with the 20-week statutory deadline



Faster backlog reduction, allowing councils to clear delayed cases



More time for caseworkers to engage directly with families



Higher satisfaction among professionals using the system

Councils involved in the pilot report that the tool is intuitive and easy to use. Caseworkers can drag and drop reports, click a button, and receive a structured EHCP draft within minutes.

One council described **EHCP Plus** as a “game-changer”, stating that it eliminates time-consuming administrative tasks, allowing professionals to concentrate on understanding each child’s unique needs and circumstances.


Another key feature is the platform’s secure, GDPR-compliant environment, ensuring that sensitive child data remains protected and private at all times. Unlike public AI models, **EHCP Plus** operates within a secure, closed cloud system designed for government-level data security standards.

Even in its early stages, **EHCP Plus** has already been used to successfully draft over 400 EHCPs, with councils reporting faster turnaround times and reduced stress among staff.

A Model for the Future



EHCP Plus is more than just a tool for EHCP drafting – it represents a step towards smarter, more efficient public services. The success of this model is already prompting exploration of similar AI assistance in other areas of children’s services, such as social care planning.

-  By combining AI innovation with deep SEND service expertise, **EHCP Plus** is helping councils modernise EHCP processes, improve statutory compliance, and deliver better outcomes for children and families.
-  **EHCP Plus** provides a timely and effective solution to the challenges facing SEND services today. It addresses delays by streamlining plan production, manages rising demand by increasing productivity, improves quality and consistency to reduce disputes, and alleviates workforce pressures by cutting administrative workload.
-  While it cannot solve broader issues like funding shortages or placement availability, it tackles the process inefficiencies that compound these challenges.

By leveraging modern technology in a practical and ethical way, **EHCP Plus** offers a genuine opportunity for positive transformation. The SEND system is under pressure, but with the right tools and innovative thinking, local authorities can build a more effective, responsive, and sustainable service for children and families who rely on EHCPs.

Call to Action: Embracing Innovation for Better EHCPs

The evidence is clear: the EHCP/SEND system in the UK is under tremendous strain, and continuing with the same processes will not resolve the backlogs or improve experiences. It's time for bold action and smart solutions. Finance Directors, Service Leaders, and School Leaders all have a pivotal role to play in transforming how EHCPs are managed.



We urge you to engage proactively with **EHCP Plus** and similar innovations as part of your strategy to improve SEND provision.



Improve Service Performance and Statutory Compliance

Service Leaders should seize the opportunity to drastically improve service delivery. Current EHCP completion rates leave significant room for improvement, and tools like **EHCP Plus** can help meet statutory 20-week targets consistently.

By adopting **EHCP Plus**, local authorities can clear existing backlogs and establish a sustainable workflow where new EHCPs are drafted quickly and accurately. This ensures that children do not wait excessively for support due to administrative delays.

Empower Your Workforce and Reduce Burnout

Service Leaders also understand the immense pressure that SEND case officers and coordinators face. Embracing **EHCP Plus** is not about replacing staff – it's about empowering them with better tools.

By removing repetitive administrative tasks, **EHCP Plus** allows professionals to focus on relationship-building, coordination, and personalising support for each child. Staff morale and retention will improve when workloads become manageable, and professionals can dedicate their expertise to directly engaging with children, families, and schools.

We urge operational leaders to take action now – integrate AI solutions like **EHCP Plus** into everyday processes and provide staff with the training to use them effectively. By doing so, local authorities can lead the way in innovation and create an attractive, sustainable working environment for professionals in the sector

Hitting statutory deadlines and delivering high-quality EHCPs will help restore trust and confidence among families and regulators.

Prioritising the evaluation and implementation of **EHCP Plus** will enable councils to move from crisis management to proactive service improvement.

Enhance Collaboration with Schools

School leadership teams—headteachers, SENCOs, and academy CEOs—are critical partners in the EHCP process. By supporting local authorities in adopting **EHCP Plus**, schools can also benefit significantly.

A quicker turnaround for EHCPs means that schools receive the guidance and resources they need sooner, reducing the time children spend without adequate support. High-quality, clearly structured EHCPs also improve planning, making it easier for schools to allocate staffing and resources effectively.

With better EHCPs, there will be fewer disputes between families and schools, leading to more constructive engagement rather than conflict resolution. We encourage school leaders to advocate for innovation, take part in pilot initiatives, and support the integration of **EHCP Plus** to create a more efficient, collaborative SEND system.

Now is the Time to Act



While government reviews and funding injections are welcome, they have historically been too slow to solve the immediate challenges within the EHCP system. By embracing technology and new ways of working, local authorities, schools, and SEND teams can make tangible improvements now.

EHCP Plus is a ready-to-use solution with a proven impact—reducing delays, increasing efficiency, and improving quality. For leaders responsible for delivering high-quality SEND support in a climate of rising demand and financial constraints, innovation is the only way forward.

We encourage all decision-makers in education and finance to take a serious look at **EHCP Plus** and similar innovations. Learn from early adopters, review the results, and consider how this solution could transform your local processes.



The needs of children and young people with SEND are only increasing, but so too are the tools available to meet those needs.




By acting decisively and collaboratively, we can:

- ✓ Reduce EHCP backlogs
- ✓ Ease the strain on professionals
- ✓ Rebuild trust with families
- ✓ Ensure that every child gets the support they need—when they need it

EHCP Plus provides a powerful means to achieve these goals.

The time to engage, implement, and lead change is now.

What's Next?

-  Contact us today to see how **EHCP Plus** can work in your area.
-  Book a demo or request a trial to experience the impacts first-hand.
-  Join the councils already transforming their EHCP processes—before demand overwhelms your local system.



Sources

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- Local Government Association (LGA) – Statements on SEND funding and system reform
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- Schools Week – Coverage on EHCP demand, funding pressures, and system challenges (2024)
- The Guardian – Investigations into EHCP backlogs and statutory deadline breaches
- Law Society Gazette – Analysis of SEND legal disputes and tribunal trends (2024)
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- Stakeholder perspectives – Statements from education leaders, local authority representatives, and SEND professionals