

Making sure every child can achieve and thrive in education

A framework for delivering inclusive education through early and sustainable SEND reform

Introduction

The challenges children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) face are well documented. These children are significantly more likely to be absent from school or excluded, and more likely to be placed in Alternative Provision or educated at home – with clear consequences for their future life chances.

This is a story of repeated system failure that prevents these children from being able to do well. At its heart, the SEND ‘crisis’ is best understood as a culmination of three long-term, underlying trends:

- Too many children do not have the right foundations for learning at an early age;
- Too few children with additional needs get early help, when and where they need it;
- Too many schools are incentivised to prioritise the needs of some children over others.

The Centre for Young Lives supports the Government’s direction of travel towards earlier intervention, stronger mainstream inclusion and support, and, as a consequence, a reduced reliance on statutory plans for large numbers of children as the only support available. However, this transition will only succeed if it is part of a shift to a model of whole-system support from birth that commands the confidence of families, schools and local authorities.

The government’s ambitions in the White Paper will only succeed if the following fundamental and interdependent principles are met:

1. **All children have the right foundations to learn:** SEND reform cannot be achieved solely within schools. Early childhood development, family stability, mental health support and poverty reduction all directly affect the development and severity of additional needs. A cross-government prevention strategy, focused on the early years and home environment, is critical for long-term success.
2. **All children with additional needs get help when and where they need it:** The White Paper must ensure that children receive rapid support easily within mainstream education, rather than only after statutory thresholds have been crossed. This requires:
 - A national mainstream inclusion standard that all schools must meet, which is visible, reliable, and consistently offered;
 - A SEND pupil premium as the financial foundation of reform, creating predictable and flexible funding settlements to support universal support;
 - Protected entitlements, with EHCPs at the top of a graduated response rather than the entry point to support.
3. **Schools fit around the needs of all children:** Inclusion will not be achieved through funding alone. Current accountability arrangements discourage schools from admitting and retaining pupils with additional needs. Reforms must ensure schools are not penalised for inclusive practice. Inspection, performance measures, and attendance expectations must recognise the needs of children requiring additional support.

1. All children have the right foundations to learn

Despite recent progress, it remains the case that too many children are growing up without the necessary ‘building blocks’ to do well. Safe and stable home environments, reduced child poverty, more opportunities to play, and ensuring families get support in the early years, should be a fundamental part of a cross-government, system-wide approach to the *prevention* of SEND.

Creating the foundations to thrive

Growing up with poverty, insecure housing or parental complex needs has a negative impact on children’s ability to attend school and learn. Children on Free School Meals (a proxy for child poverty) experience higher rates of SEND than the wider population, and more than half of Children in Need (CIN) have SEND. A cross-departmental SEND strategy must start with supporting safe and stable home environments. This further reducing child poverty – building on the decision to lift the Two Child Limit – by removing the Child Benefit Cap, and a strategy to reduce the number of children in temporary accommodation. This should be supported by strategies to protect children from domestic abuse, substance use, neglect and abuse, coupled with investment to promote and support parental mental health. These actions would play a direct role in reducing SEND driven by adverse childhood experiences.

Boosting support in the early years

Early cognitive, language, social and emotional development is the strongest predictor of later educational need. The Best Start in Life Strategy, and the school readiness target have a critical role to play. Evidence from Sure Start shows that preventative support in the early years can reduce the severity and escalation of need and the requirement for intensive provision later in childhood. The Best Start in Life Strategy signals a welcome move towards better support in the early years, with £500 million over three years invested in Best Start Family Hubs. However, this is only a fraction of the £2.4 billion spent each year at the peak of Sure Start. We need a far more ambitious investment in high-quality early years support and provision, skilled early years practitioners, and early speech, language and communication support. This would reduce the proportion of children who are already behind when they start school.

Boosting opportunities to play

Play is fundamental to young children’s learning and development, yet today’s children are playing less than previous generations did. Over the last fifteen years, stay and play opportunities have been stripped back, school play times have been squeezed, playgrounds have fallen into disrepair and youth clubs have closed. While recent proposals to limit social media use and provide stronger advice to parents are welcome, we need to provide children with a better alternative. Almost twenty years since the last play strategy, we need a new national plan of action to get children playing again.

2. All children with additional needs get help when and where they need it

The current system often responds late, after needs have escalated, statutory thresholds have been crossed, and costs have multiplied. This is neither effective nor sustainable. Incremental adjustments within the existing framework are unlikely to work without structural reform. We need to see a fundamental shift towards early support in mainstream education.

Early assessment

The Early Years Foundation Stage progress check at age 2 and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) at 4-to-5 years of age, could be better used to identify children who are more likely to require SEND support in future. While teachers and school leaders already have EYFSP data, it is only conducted once and so may fail to identify children whose difficulties emerge later in childhood. The progress check at age 2 is inconsistently applied and does not link to any meaningful support for children who are not on track to be ready for primary school.

The Progress Check should be reformed to ensure more consistent application, and a clearer pathway of support between age 2 and age 4-5. Tools that assess non-academic skills beyond the early years should also be rolled out nationally to drive earlier identification and support of SEND. The Electronic Development and Support Tool (EDST) is an innovative example of an assessment to suit this purpose.

Information like health conditions or birth factors that may facilitate earlier identification of SEND is rarely shared directly with schools. Connected public services, underpinned by linked local authority, health and education data, are needed to speed up identification of SEND and respond appropriately.

Early access to mental health support

A growing proportion of SEND, particularly among older children, relates to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Delayed access to mental health support means that these difficulties often escalate into long-term, complex needs. Only 40% of children with mental health needs access support, many of whom are on lengthy waiting lists while their mental health deteriorates. Early, widespread, low-threshold access to school-based and community mental health support is essential to prevent escalation into more intensive SEND provision. This requires the national roll-out of mental health support teams in schools, mental health support in Young Futures and other youth programmes, and substantial investment in children's mental health services to close the "treatment gap".

Early and flexible help for all children with SEND

Too many children with SEND wait too long for support through arduous processes. Support is overwhelmingly costly, and there is an overreliance on help outside of mainstream education, with high fees for transport and specialist schools. We propose a shift to early, flexible help within mainstream education for children with SEND, characterised by:

- **A universal mainstream offer:** Every mainstream school should be expected and resourced to meet a national inclusion standard. This should include trained staff, early intervention programmes, speech and language support, behavioural and emotional support, and low-threshold mental health provision. Early identification should be embedded throughout primary and secondary education. This offer must be visible and reliable to families. Only when early support is available, predictable and trusted will the demand for statutory plans reduce.
- **A SEND Pupil Premium as a financial lever for reform:** This should be allocated on the basis of the overall cohort's need, rather than the presence of an EHCP. This funding would allow schools to put support in place immediately when needs are identified, removing the current incentive for families and schools to pursue statutory plans immediately. The SEND Pupil Premium should be understood not as an additional programme but as the necessary precondition for sustainable EHCP reform. Without it, demand for statutory plans will continue to rise regardless of legal changes.

- **A smaller (because more children will receive early support), but still vital role for EHCPs:** Families must have confidence that their children's needs will be met. Reform should therefore maintain strong statutory protections and replace adversarial processes with guarantees of provision. This requires: a national inclusion framework defining what support every school must provide; clear accountability for delivery; and independent routes of redress if provision is not delivered. EHCPs would sit at the top of a graduated response, returning to their original purpose of highly individualised and specialist support for a small group of children with the highest needs. But the system must reduce the number of children whose needs progress to the point where an EHCP becomes necessary.

3. Schools fit around the needs of all children

The accountability system, weighted toward attainment, incentivises the marginalisation of children who need additional support. We welcome early indications of the Government moving away from this approach, such as reforms to Ofsted, investment in inclusion as CPD, and recent commitments to reduce the impact of suspensions. However, early perspectives on the new Ofsted framework suggest that it may not be as effective as intended, and a more fundamental shift is necessary.

Inclusion will never be prioritised until it measured, mandated and rewarded. It should be seen as a design principle for all education policy. We need a paradigm shift that:

- Places inclusion at the centre of the accountability system, the curriculum, leadership and everyday practice.
- Re-defines success beyond test scores and discipline to include belonging, wellbeing and engagement – with outcomes measured for all children, not just those who remain on roll.
- Nurtures trust and resilience rather than reactive, punitive measures.
- Provides a flexible and inclusive curriculum and substantial enrichment opportunities.
- Provides wraparound support through free breakfast clubs and after school clubs.

Conclusions

Only these three fundamental principles can turn the tide on the SEND crisis. The government's plans for SEND reform will only result in genuine long-term improvement if the enabling conditions outlined in this paper are fulfilled.

None of these conditions can be taken in isolation. Schools will not be able to reduce exclusions, absence and suspensions without sufficient early support in classrooms. But early support will also not be effective without schools being inclusive by default, and being supported by the system to be inclusive. Needs will continue to rise if we fail to give all children the right foundations in life through strong early years support, better home environments, and opportunities to play, learn, and thrive.

The Government must not only set out a bold long-term vision for system that equips every child to thrive – but the comprehensive structural reform to deliver it.