

Response to SEND Reform: putting children and young people first

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About the authors:

Dr Vasilis Strogilos is an Associate Professor with extensive research experience on the inclusion of students with SEND in mainstream schools. His work focuses on developing inclusive pedagogy and curricula, and on supporting and empowering parents of children with SEND. He has particular expertise in co-teaching, resourced provision, and differentiated instruction. Vasilis has been invited to advise the Department for Education on evidence-based research and curriculum reform relating to the education of students with SEND in mainstream settings. Kate Freeth is a teaching fellow. Kate's main teaching interests are in Secondary English, including raising literacy levels through adaptive and personalised teaching methods. She also has a keen interest in SEND issues across all phases of Education in the UK and internationally. Elinor Williams is an interdisciplinary postgraduate researcher working with autistic young people who are persistently absent from mainstream education. Hongye Li is a postgraduate researcher working on assistive technology for disabled students in English mainstream secondary schools. Professor Melanie Nind, Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, is Deputy Director of the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership and one of the co-directors of the ESRC National Centre for Research Methods where she leads research on the pedagogy of research methods learning. Her recent research projects have focused on pedagogy and innovation in research methods, changing research practices in response to Covid-19, and on quality and belonging in inclusive research.

Executive summary

In response to the call for evidence on the '[Response to SEND Reform: putting children and young people first](#)' by the Department for Education, we make the following recommendations:

Our policy recommendations:

1. Send out child-friendly and parent-friendly questions to all students with an EHCP and to their parents respectively to question them directly and separately about their experiences and views. (Q1)
2. Compile a national library with Government guidance of recommended approaches for needs assessment, interventions and forms of provision, including what training and resources are needed and when each approach should be used. (Q2)
3. Ensure schools review their SEND provision regularly using data on attendance, participation, progress and wellbeing, as well as by requesting feedback from young people and their families. (Q2)
4. Ensure all teachers have access to training that enables them to enact the Universal offer. (Q3). Specific teacher training should be offered at a national scale and should be monitored and assessed regularly to meet current best practice standards. (Q18). The DfE should also fund university-led training programmes that integrate theoretical and practical learning, equipping teachers with critical disability studies perspectives and research-informed approaches necessary for sustainable, inclusive SEND provision. (Q12)

5. Produce guidance for schools to update their ISPs at least once per term. However, schools should be aware of the individuality of need and should take parents and children's views into account when more updates may be necessary, using school data where needed. (Q4)
6. Implement school-based employment of health and social care professionals (e.g. across school clusters), rather than relying on visiting services. Expertise from specialist settings should be mobilised to build capacity in mainstream education. (Q5)
7. Children in Specialist layer should receive specialist support that is integrated and child- and family-centred. School belonging is essential for them to thrive so access to ordinary school environments with varying amounts and types of specialist input, and a case-by-case integration of specialist environments and specialist curricula should be facilitated. (Q6)
8. Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs) should include core elements from across areas of development within each package with specific information regarding intensity of the support needed in each area, type and frequency of provision, required resources and staff training, and outline appropriate settings, equipment, curriculum adaptations, and indicative targets to guide ISPs. (Q22)

Q1. We want children, young people and their families to be involved in making better, evidence-based decisions about SEND, both in their local area and across the country.

How can we make sure children, young people and their families have a genuine say in these decisions?

The views of parents and children should be sought, considered, and recorded both separately and holistically. As children and young people mature, their individual voice should be prioritised in its own right, and parental views should not automatically be treated as a proxy for the child's own perspective. To hear voices clearly, begin by sending separate questions to all students with an EHCP and their parents using child-friendly and parent-friendly methods to elicit meaningful answers (e.g. use of pictures). This could be done through schools, but it is important to be clear that neither staff nor parents should influence the CYP's answers. The questions should ask what is working well for them (and why), what they would like to see done differently (and why) and whether they have additional comments. This could be expanded by approaching all schools and enabling any interested students and parents to answer the questions. If wanted, a social media campaign could also ask for wider response – but this may make it hard to ascertain whether voices have been muted by external influence. To elicit clear and useful responses it would be helpful to include an introductory note to explain that the government is seeking 'evidence-based' responses (along with a clear explanation of what this means). Essentially, in order to make sure CYP and their families have a genuine say in these decisions they must be asked to give their own responses to specific questions.

Q2. How can we make sure that high-quality evidence and best practice inform decisions about SEND? Please share examples.

High-quality evidence and best practice should inform SEND decisions consistently across the country. Schools and local areas should be encouraged to use independently evaluated approaches, rather than relying on postcode variation or poorly evidenced practice. High-quality evidence should include qualitative work and should carefully consider how success is measured. To embed evidence-based practices, the government could compile a national library of recommended approaches for assessment of need, interventions and forms of provision, including what training and resources are needed and when each approach should be used. Local areas could also review SEND provision

regularly using data on attendance, participation, progress and wellbeing to identify ineffective approaches and ensure all demographics are being supported. Thirdly, staff training should be linked to implementation: staff should be trained to use new approaches consistently and the impact should be reviewed with parents and young people. Professional expertise and the lived experience of children, young people and families should also be considered to ensure that evidence-informed decisions are effective and practical in each case.

Q3. How can we ensure that children are best supported by the Universal offer?

The Universal offer underpins everything and requires a shift in mindset that every teacher and every school is responsible for to support every pupil. This includes their school belonging, emotional wellbeing as well as educational process and outcomes. It requires attention to staff wellbeing, support and skills development, to sustain commitment to the long term project of enhancing provision for all. Support mechanisms and whole school approaches need to be in place for staff to collaborate with each other, as well as with children, their families and communities, to make the most of valuable resources. Fundamentally teacher training needs to foreground the role of universal approaches in attaining two main goals: (1) supporting all children including those at high-risk of developing problems and (2) meeting their needs alongside targeted approaches. Leadership teams and teachers need to understand how to embed support within everyday, positive, holistic ways of working to enable the participation and achievement of all. There is powerful evidence in relation to mental health support in [Weare & Nind 2011](#) and in relation to extending everyday pedagogy in [Florian & Black-Hawkins 2013](#).

Q4. How can we ensure that children in the Targeted layer are best supported?

If school staff understand the importance of individual accommodations and have the time and resources to make them, targeted support has the best chance of success. Evidence suggests that much of the difficulty with implementing SEN support currently is linked to staff training and capacity (e.g. [Simmons, Read & Parfitt, 2026](#)). Student voice, where possible complemented by parents, is key to support that makes a difference ([Prunty, Dupont & McDaid, 2012](#)). Creative and accessible strategies for capturing these voices are increasingly seen as the gold-standard in research, and this should be mirrored in schools. Creating and updating ISPs is time-consuming. Requirements on the regularity of updating ISPs should not be one size fits all. Some students have consistent learning needs that will not vary much over time. Others will require more regular review. Schools should be expected to update ISPs at least once per year but should use data and the views of children and parents to identify where more regular updates should be made. In the context of conditions like ADHD and autism, outcomes should not focus on removing a child's difference, but on ensuring their differences are accommodated throughout their education – mirroring the approach to disabilities in the workplace and wider world.

Q5. How can we ensure that children in the Targeted Plus layer are best supported?

Children in the Targeted Plus layer can be best supported if: i) the experts at hand work in close collaboration with schools. Research highlights challenges in multi-agency working, including time constraints, limited resources, differing professional contexts and poor communication (e.g. [Birch et al., 2023](#)). To address this, the DfE should support school-based employment of health and social care professionals (e.g. across school clusters), rather than relying on visiting services. In countries such as Finland, Greece and the USA, professionals are embedded in schools or districts, enabling stronger collaboration and improved pupil outcomes; ii) Individual Support Plans (ISPs) are developed jointly by school staff and specialists, not only by school staff. Specialists should also monitor progress towards ISP targets and provide ongoing guidance; and iii) reduce reliance on alternative provision and specialist

placements by prioritising support within mainstream schools. Expertise from specialist settings should be mobilised to build capacity in mainstream education.

Q6. How can we ensure that children in the Specialist layer are best supported?

Best support for children and young people with the most complex needs should not mean being stripped of the support of siblings, peers and local communities in order to access specialist provision. To be most effective, specialist support needs to be an enrichment to universal support, not a replacement. In this way use of natural supports can be optimised and stigma and isolation prevented. Partnership working such as in the [Team around the child](#) approach can help ensure that supports are integrated and child- and family-centred. Children with complex needs are best supported locally, with varying amounts and types of specialist input in relation to accessing ordinary school environments and curricula or specialist environments and curricula, or often a bit of both. School belonging remains essential for this group to thrive, and this requires that they are accepted, respected, and supported within communities where children and young people can engage in educational and social activities with others across their differences.

Q12. What are the most important issues for national training to cover, to help support children and young people with SEND?

National online training packages alone are insufficient. The DfE should fund university-led postgraduate (PG) training that integrates theoretical and practical learning. Without strong theoretical grounding, practice risks remaining superficial rather than transformative. If teachers are not introduced to theories and perspectives from critical disability studies, their practice may reproduce medicalised, deficit-oriented views and ‘quick fix’ approaches that do not support sustainable support within SEND provision ([Goodley, 2014](#)). There is a need for more educators with postgraduate level qualifications in inclusion and SEND, who can bring research-informed knowledge and critical thinking into schools. Universities are well placed to deliver this through programmes that combine theory with application. Key areas should include: i) the social model of disability and its application; ii) assistive technology and accessibility, including how school culture shapes their use; iii) adaptive teaching, including differentiation and ISPs; and iv) understanding societal barriers faced by children with specific needs and working in partnership with families and children and young people.

Q18. How can we make sure that every area can meet the full range of the needs of children and young people through Inclusion Bases?

Currently, some areas/schools are able to deliver excellent, quality provision – while others fall considerably short. This is partly due to ad-hoc, non-centralised training for staff. There will need to be a focussed and targeted national training programme for all teachers that is able to meet national targets. National benchmarks will need to be introduced, so that all Inclusion Base managers and teachers know and understand what is expected of them and have the skills and knowledge to deliver. Essentially, training (for all teachers) in SEND will need to be increased. The new training will need to be benchmarked, monitored, evaluated and assessed. It will then need to be modified, depending on results seen. There will need to be ongoing training for new teachers, and for teachers new to each setting. In addition, new communication channels will need to be developed to enable teachers in Specialised settings to communicate with teachers in Inclusion Bases and vice versa. In this way, expertise will be enabled to be shared clearly and appropriately. Ideally each LA will have at least one inclusion base for each area of development to support communities of practice with expertise.

Q22. How can Specialist Provision Packages be designed to effectively support the main types of need we currently recognise?

As children's needs rarely fit a single 'area of development', Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs) should include core elements from across areas within each package. What should vary is the intensity of support, type and level of resources, appropriate setting, and equipment. For example, one package may include support for mild needs across areas such as working memory, fine motor skills, emotional regulation and language comprehension, while another reflects more moderate needs. Each SPP should also specify: the professionals involved; indicative hours of support; expectations for collaboration with families (e.g. frequency of meetings); and the training required for school staff. In addition, each package should outline relevant curriculum adaptations and indicative targets to inform Individual Support Plans (ISPs).

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