The special educational needs crisis in England – challenges, drivers, and possible ways forward

In this important paper Benedicte Yue, CFO at River Learning Trust, ISBL Trustee & member of the ISBL Policy Group, shares her thoughts and insights, setting out twelve key priorities to create a system that is both effective and financially sustainable moving from a "deficit model" that focuses on a child's perceived flaws to a "social model" where support is readily available without requiring a formal label or diagnosis.

1st September 2025

As of January 2025, over 1.7 million pupils in England, nearly 20% of the total pupil population, are regarded as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with 0.5 million of these pupils holding an education, health and care plan (EHCP)[1]. Despite increasing high needs funding, from £5.2bn in 2014-15[2] (when the Children and Families Act 2014 was introduced) to £12bn in 2025-26[3], there is limited evidence that this additional investment has improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Demand for EHCPs, seen as the only way to attract support, has surged even faster than funding.

The system has become completely overwhelmed, leaving schools and local authorities (LAs) struggling with insufficient resources and lack of specialist support leading to an increasingly adversarial relationship with families. In 2024, less than half of new EHCPs were issued within the 20-week statutory time frame, meaning lengthy delays in provision. Appeals to tribunals are rising, with 98% of decisions in 2023 favouring parents. Furthermore, 31% of joint local area SEND inspections by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) between January 2023 and March 2024 found "widespread and/or systemic failings". As well as not delivering for children and young people with SEND, the system is unaffordable. This situation has led to widespread overspending by local authorities (LAs), with a national cumulative high needs deficit currently estimated at £3.3 billion[4] that keeps growing, threatening nearly half of English LAs with effective bankruptcy if current protections were removed.

It is not merely about funding shortfalls; it's a deeply systemic dysfunction where SEND students are expected to adapt to an environment that doesn't fit them. Variable standards, funding and practice, narrow accountability measures, siloed structures, rigid curriculum and assessments, overstretched workforce and services create a postcode lottery of provision that continues to marginalise too many. These structural barriers and conflicting policy pressures have created perverse incentives that drive

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[1] Department for Education, "SEND in England: census data", January 2025.

[2] UK Parliament research briefing

[3] High needs funding: 2025 to 2026 operational guide

[4] Estimate from Local Government Association in April 2025

exclusionary behaviour, segregation, under achievement, disengagement and mental health challenges.

Urgent reform is needed. After endless reports highlighting the scale of the problem and positive piecemeal initiatives, we now need a long-term strategy that brings coherence to the system around shared values that is fully funded and owned across all levels.

While waiting for the white paper expected in the autumn, this paper intends to bring clarity on these complex issues, identify key areas for policy development and reflect on possible ways forward focusing particularly on the model of change that will be critical to the success of those reforms.

We hope that the white paper will set out the Government vision for inclusion, clarify expectations and create the environment, resources and accountability levers for change while leaving space for informed professionalism, bottom-up initiatives and collaboration that can quickly make a difference locally while aiming for wider structural reforms.

It is now an opportunity to reimagine inclusion. This is the most important education reform of the decade which has been delayed for far too long. We simply cannot afford to get it wrong. This will require constructive collaboration between all political parties, parents and professional organisations so that we can together design a coherent education system where every child can flourish.

Let's stop fighting for the extra box and remove the barriers for all
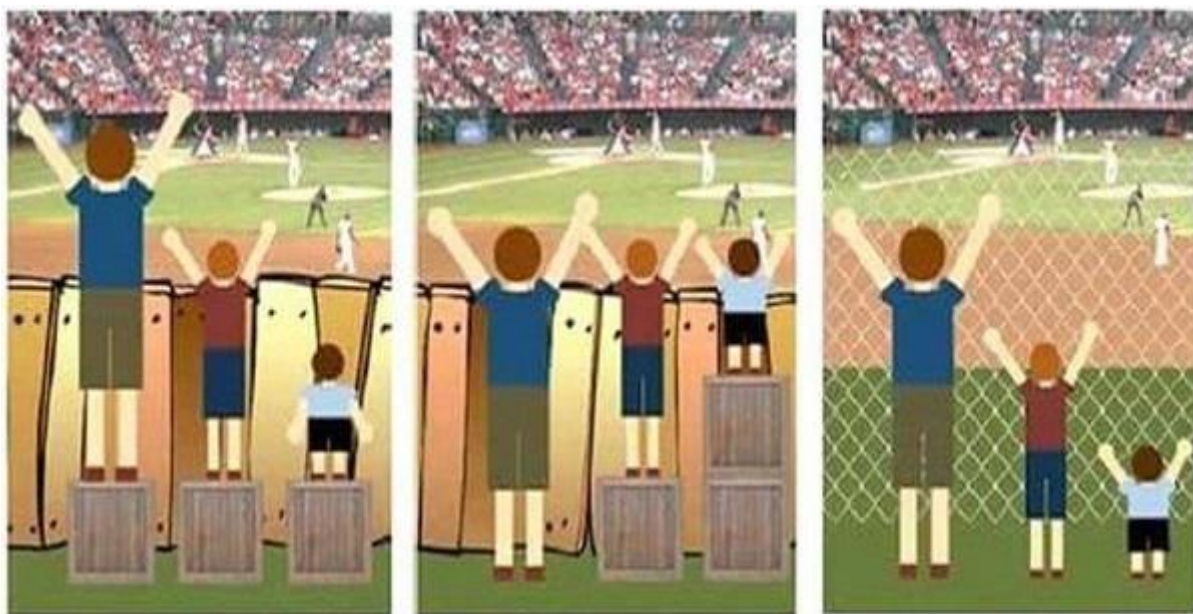
1   Key drivers of the current crisis

Several interconnected factors contribute to the current crisis:

- **Increasing demand and complexity:** The rapid increase in EHCPs is driven by changes in both need and demand. The number of profound needs linked to physical disability has thankfully remained stable. However, the increase is particularly significant for autistic spectrum disorder

(ASD), social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Whilst we observe a rise internationally, England is an outlier in the number of children requiring statutory support. The extension of LA responsibilities to age 25 also adds to demand.

- **Weaknesses in the statutory framework and misaligned accountabilities:** The legal definitions of SEND and the criteria for EHCPs are unclear, with "what should be generally provided" in mainstream education not specified, leading to inconsistency. LAs are held accountable for provision but have limited control over education settings, and misaligned incentives mean schools may seek EHCPs for funding or, in some cases, exclude challenging pupils. Health services also face competing priorities, creating gaps in provision.

- **Challenges in mainstream education:** Reforms have made mainstream education less inclusive with a too narrow academic curriculum and not enough focus on inclusion at all levels in teacher training and professional development. Performance measures can divert attention from creative or vocational pathways that might better serve some learners. Accountability systems prioritise academic attainment over inclusivity. Many mainstream schools lack the resources and support needed to effectively include children with SEND. The current workforce is overstretched and not enough prepared for inclusive practice.

- **Reduction in wider support services and early intervention**: Austerity and funding cuts have significantly reduced the capacity of crucial support services like early intervention (family support, extended schools, youth services, behaviour support, etc.). Spend on SEND support services has been redirected to meet growing demand for specialist provision and statutory requirements. Families feel they have no option but to request EHCPs or place their children in special settings to access necessary funding and support, creating a "vicious cycle" of demand for statutory plans.

- **Lack of special school places and over-reliance on expensive independent schools, often leading to increased transport costs:** The number of specialist places varies widely between LAs. The use of the independent sector is often reactive rather than strategic, lacking clear regulation and consistent funding rates and raising concerns about profit-making from state funded placements. Workforce drain from the public to the private sector also compounds challenges.

- **Workforce shortages:** Key professions, including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), face systemic recruitment and retention difficulties. The valuable time of specialists is often consumed by statutory assessments and paperwork instead of direct child support, and lower job satisfaction has led to recruitment and retention challenges and a drift to the private sector.

The current policy context has led to a fragmented education system with many barriers to inclusion (admissions, curriculum, assessment, accountability, funding) that Mel Ainscow, emeritus professor at Manchester University would describe to some extent as the product of a competitive approach to policy. I think his quote in a recent interview sums it up very well:

"If you have a competition, you get winners, and the only way you can get winners is by creating losers. Now, that is probably alright in the market or the shopping mall, but we cannot have a national education system that is designed to create losers."

2   National government response

Since 2019, successive governments have undertaken numerous initiatives to address the SEND crisis, largely spurred by the recognition that the 2014 Children and Families Act did not fully resolve systemic issues.

- The foundation for recent reforms was laid with the **launch of the SEND review in 2019**. This led to the publication of the **"Right Support, Right Place, Right Time" Green Paper in March 2022**, proposing a unified national SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) system, national standards, and standardised, digitised Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. The subsequent **SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan in March 2023** provided a detailed roadmap for these reforms. To test proposals and gather evidence, Regional Expert Partnerships were established, working directly with local areas. A National SEND Delivery Board was also proposed to oversee national standards and ensure accountability. Inclusion dashboards were introduced, with local areas developing their own to track SEND data and measure impact, and each Integrated Care Board (ICB) is required to appoint an executive lead for SEND, fostering better collaboration between education and health.

- These strategic frameworks have been supported by **significant additional investments**. High Needs Funding has nearly doubled since 2019. Programmes like **Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value** were introduced to support local authorities with SEND deficits, although new Safety Valve arrangements have been paused. There has also been a **push for bandings and tariffs** in SEND funding, aiming for greater consistency and cost control, albeit without clear evidence to support this approach.

Since July 2024, the new Labour government has continued these reforms, emphasising specific new priorities and legislative changes.

- A strong emphasis has been placed on **early identification of needs**. The government launched an early years' strategy in July, reintroducing elements akin to "Sure Start." Investment has been directed towards **workforce development**, with training for up to 5,000 early years SENCos and 400 educational psychologists. **Efforts to promote mainstream inclusivity** continue, with targeted funding and teacher training aiming to enhance the capacity of mainstream schools to support SEND pupils, leading to an increase in the percentage of pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools to 56.2% in 2025. A positive message in that regard was sent by the new Government placing SEND under the schools' minister.

- Recognising the importance of building capacity and capability of the workforce, SEND has been given **greater emphasis in teacher training** and **a funded new SENCo National Professional Qualification** (NPQ) was introduced.

- The **"Statutory Override", allowing local authorities to keep their deficits off balance sheet, has been extended to 2028**, offering temporary financial relief to local authorities. Furthermore, **substantial capital investment** has been provided to expand specialist capacity, including a £740 million allocation in March 2025 for 10,000 new specialist places, part of a broader £2.6 billion investment between 2022 and 2025.

- The **accountability, monitoring and oversight has also been strengthened**. The **revised Ofsted framework now places inclusion as a central thread of inspections**, broadening its focus beyond just special needs to include all disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Further initiatives include proposals within the Children's Wellbeing and School Bill to grant Local Authorities **more power to direct admissions to academies**.

- A current **curriculum and assessment review**, with final recommendations expected in autumn 2025, signals a commitment to inclusion. The review aims for a more flexible, broader, and representative curriculum with more space for vocational subjects, promoting diverse and inclusive content, and considering alternative assessment models.

There is considerable goodwill and hope within the system, evidenced by the establishment of expert groups on mainstream inclusion and neurodiversity, various pilot programmes, and numerous examples of good practice nationwide. However, despite these extensive efforts and the significant injection of funding, the current reforms have limited impact. A critical limitation is the **lack of a single, coherent strategy bringing together these often-piecemeal initiatives, leading to a fragmented approach**. Many measures are not always demonstrably informed by evidence or fail to address the underlying drivers of rising demand and costs. **Many initiatives perpetuate a "deficit model," where funding is often tied to diagnosis, rather than proactive intervention**. There is limited evidence of increased financial sustainability across the system, and **the "Statutory Override" merely offers short-term relief rather than a long-term solution to local authority deficits**. Furthermore, the interconnected nature of the issues and political changes have undoubtedly caused delays. While funding has increased substantially, **the process of change will require a level of double funding before being able to spend the high needs budget more efficiently and sustainably once the reforms are in place**.   While there are many examples of good practice, the lack of effective levers to scale these across the country means their impact remains localised. Ultimately, for lasting change, there is a clear and urgent need for more fundamental, coherent, and evidence-based reform that addresses the systemic issues driving the SEND crisis. The upcoming Schools White Paper in autumn 2025 is anticipated to shape the next phase of reform.

3   Ways forward

In that context, the below intends to outline **twelve key priorities** that should in my view underpin some of those reforms in order to design an inclusive education system from the outset, recognising that barriers to inclusion are systemic, not individual, and that change relies on interconnected factors around workforce, specialist support services, curriculum& assessment, funding, accountability, infrastructure and joined up local provision that create the ecosystem for every child to thrive.

1) Need for a national vision & values: from bolt-on to built-in inclusion

A fundamental shift is needed, starting with a **clear national vision for an inclusive education system**. This vision should **move away from a deficit-based model of what's wrong with the child or what the child can't do, to a rights-based inclusive approach** of pedagogy & support

away from labels with the principle of equity at the centre. Inclusion should be seen as a guiding value for the whole system, not just a bolt-on provision. It should be based around a clear **national statement of values.** It means creating the conditions where every learner can thrive by removing barriers to learning, fostering belonging and adapting systems to meet diverse needs rather than asking children to adapt to a rigid structure. The system should become **proactive rather than reactive**, ensuring it is built for all learners in mind from the outset.

This starts by defining what inclusion means so that we can then align the resources, support, training, funding & accountability measures to those expectations.

- **Defining Inclusion and "Ordinarily Available Provision"**: Whilst the UK Government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which states in its Art 24 clear principles of what inclusive education means, England currently lacks a statutory definition of inclusion. A national framework is needed to set consistent, enforceable expectations for inclusive practice across all settings, clearly defining "inclusive mainstream" and what good provision looks like, moving beyond a narrow focus on special needs to encompass all disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.
- **Clarifying SEND and EHCP Thresholds** reserving EHCPs for young people requiring **very significant support** beyond what an enhanced "ordinarily available provision" can provide. These could be issues for example to pupils in designated specialised settings or those with significant additional needs who receive support beyond education, say from social work or the NHS. This latter model could mirror Scotland's statutory system of coordinated service plans[1] (CSPs).
- **Strengthening ordinarily available provision/the quality and consistency** of the mainstream SEND offer **to be much more inclusive**, enabling settings to meet a wider range of needs without the need for a diagnosis, label or EHCP. This requires **enabling schools rather than simply mandating more inclusion**, creating an environment where all children learn and participate together. This would imply **clarifying what support is expected from schools** through practical guidance with graduated approach and quality standards. The goal is for more parents to feel their children's needs are met through universal and targeted SEND support services, reducing the perceived necessity of an EHCP to access additional support.
- **Emphasis on Early Intervention:** A strong focus on **early identification and intervention**, especially in the early years, is crucial to prevent needs from escalating to the point where an EHCP is requested.
- **Reviewing admissions and commissioning processes** to ensure equity in access to provision for similar needs: The current system tends to favour those that are better able to navigate the statutory system.
- **Language Matters:** Shift from a language that "pathologises" special educational needs (focusing on what's "wrong" with the child) to a social model, a rights-based approach focusing on what support they need.

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[1] https://schoolsweek.co.uk/how-ministers-can-reduce-ehcps-without-limiting-parents-rights/

2) Build expertise, confidence and capacity in the workforce

Teachers are the main policy makers are in the classroom. We need to invest in them and give them the training, tools and support they need to achieve this.

This involves **improving teacher training and continuous professional development** to equip staff to support pupils with SEND in line with clarified provision. **But the training would need to be embedded and mandatory, not just optional**. Key steps include reviewing initial teacher training and early career frameworks as well as developing practical guides. **A whole-system, cross-government workforce strategy is also vital to address shortages of specialists** such as speech and language therapists and educational psychologists and ensure sufficient skilled practitioners. By freeing up valuable specialist time from statutory assessments, these professionals can focus on direct support. Collaboration opportunities, such as local SENDCo networks and peer observation, should be supported to share positive practice and build capacity.

3) Better outreach support available either from LAs or specialist settings

Increasing the capacity of specialists to support schools is crucial. This involves **developing multidisciplinary support teams** (including therapists, educational psychologists, and family support workers) that are physically present in schools and accessible without the need for individual statutory plans. These teams would build whole-school capacity through coaching and professional supervision. Additionally, **special schools should play a broader role by offering their expertise, training, and outreach to mainstream settings**, creating a more permeable boundary between mainstream and specialist provision. Growing co-located provision, where specialist expertise is available within mainstream schools would also be beneficial.

4) Design curriculum, assessment, pedagogy with all learners in mind

The **curriculum, teaching practices and assessments methods can be barriers to inclusion** or even when children don't see themselves portrayed in educational resources, they receive a message that they don't belong. **If some children don't learn the way we teach, we should start teaching the way they learn**.

This means moving beyond a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach and instead designing education with all learners in mind **allowing for different rates of learning and different pathways** (academic, vocational, functional, life skills) that better prepare all pupils for their next steps and ultimately successful adulthood.

5) Better communication with parents and co-production

Involving children, young people, and their families in assessment and planning processes are fundamental to ensuring effective support that genuinely meets the needs and respects the rights of pupils with SEND and their families. This involves shared decision-making, actively listening to their views, and providing accurate and timely information

6) Moving away from pupil led funding and greater collective responsibility via clusters

The current funding model is financially unsustainable and inefficient. High needs funding is allocated to mainstream schools through the core funding in what is called the "£6,000 notional SEN" which has not increased since 2014, and statutory support is funded via top up through the EHCPs. **The current system was not designed to cope with a significant rise in demand** with almost 40 per cent of young people assigned the label of SEND at some point in their school career. The needs profile has also changed over that period with the increase largely due to Autism, speech and language and SEMH including ADHD. In that context, having a funding system that is based on individualised funding, where getting an EHCP is seen as the only way to attract funding, cannot cope the volume. And this model is not efficient either. It is **too bureaucratic and reactive with a significant amount of bureaucracy and legal battles taking precious time of our specialists in paperwork** rather than frontline support. Schools, also suffer from budget instability relying on unpredictable top ups, making long-term planning and workforce investment incredibly difficult.

There is also a **lack of equity on how the high needs block is allocated** between LAs with still a substantial element based on historical factors often penalising efficient LAs and creating a postcode lottery for provision. Inequity again in accessing the provision as some seem to be more able to navigate the system, and finally inequity between schools themselves as due to perverse incentives around funding & accountability and a **lack of consistency, some schools seem to be more inclusive than others**.
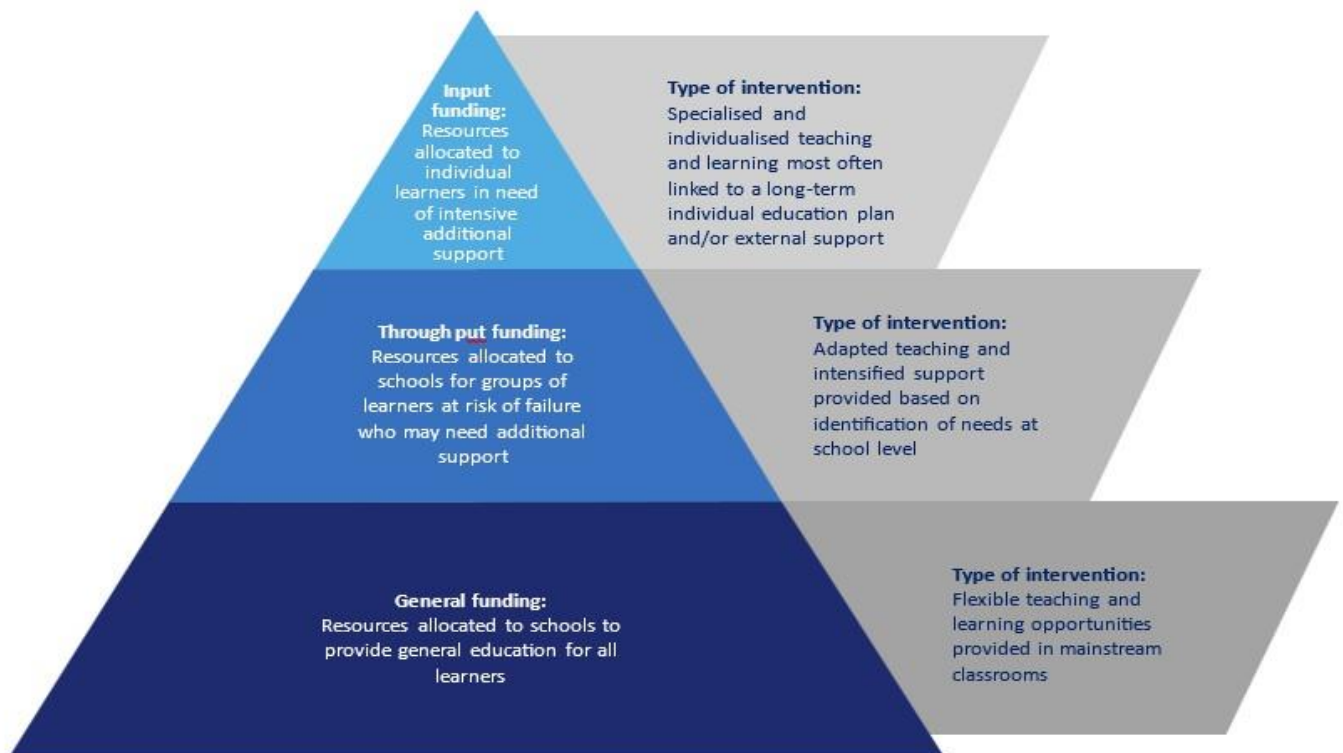**The current funding model therefore incentivises the opposite of what we want from schools"** by attracting funding when inclusion fails and penalising schools where it succeeds and places a huge stake on EHCPs seen as the only way to access support.

Research by Cor Meijer across 17 countries from as far back as 1999 still rings true, showing that **input models, where funding is allocated per pupil, can paradoxically lead to less inclusion**. His work identifies two main funding models:

- **Input models** which often reinforce the identification of low achievement in order to generate more funds. Input models tend to lead to less inclusion, more labelling and rising costs and more segregation in specialist settings. They are also often linked to costly bureaucratic procedures such as diagnosis, categorisation, appeals and litigation. Overall, it was concluded that those models could create disincentives to inclusion, foster exclusionary strategic behaviours. Schools may either feel disempowered to act inclusively or that they are being treated inequitably, and may place schools that are committed to inclusive education at a disadvantage.
Parents will always attempt to get the best for their child and, as a result, will try to get the highest funding possible. Pupil bound budgets are therefore not advisable for pupils with milder needs. Criteria for learning disabilities are vague and subjective and change over time which causes an issue if funding is linked to pupils.

- **Throughput models** are often associated with more decentralised approaches that provide great degrees of flexibility, particularly at local and school levels. In such models, budgets for special needs are delegated at central level to regional institutions which then decide how the money is spent based on local expertise & context. Central to this model is the issue of

accountability to know how the funds are spent and results achieved and this approach needs to be properly implemented and co-ordinated to avoid too much variability.

The European agency research concludes that **the most effective models tend to combine the 2 main approaches with whole school (throughput) funding and reserving input funding (needs based) for the most severe needs** as illustrated in the diagram below.

Input funding: Resources allocated to individual learners in need of intensive additional support

Type of intervention: Specialised and individualised teaching and learning most often linked to a long-term individual education plan and/or external support

Through put funding: Resources allocated to schools for groups of learners at risk of failure who may need additional support

Type of intervention: Adapted teaching and intensified support provided based on identification of needs at school level

General funding: Resources allocated to schools to provide general education for all learners

Type of intervention: Flexible teaching and learning opportunities provided in mainstream classrooms

Source: https://www.european-agency.org/sites/default/files/fpies_pcf_0.pdf

If the Government intends to place greater priority on mainstream inclusion, this could mean:

- **Increasing schools core funding directly to support the delivery of the universal offer without the needs for an EHCP** for the vast majority of more moderate needs moving away from individual "top-ups" to cohort-level funding models for mainstream settings, with associated changes in accountability.

- **Devolving additional funding to group of schools/clusters** with decisions made collectively that are not dependent on EHCPs for those with more complex needs beyond what mainstream school can ordinarily provide. This would promote peer support, equitable resource targeting, and dynamic use of funding.

- **Retaining individualised funding for children with severe, profound, or multiple learning difficulties**.

- **Gradually ensure greater equity in the allocation of the High Needs Block (HNB),** shifting from historical spend to objective criteria based on the actual needs of the area, like demographics and disadvantage levels.

The above does not cover the funding for specialist settings and post 16 and early years where alternative models also need to be considered to ensure greater sufficiency and stability in funding.

This proactive approach would offer **greater budget stability** for schools, allowing for longer-term planning and investment in the workforce rather than relying on unpredictable top-ups. It would also **reduce bureaucracy** by freeing up SENDCos and support services from EHCP paperwork, potentially reducing tribunal appeals, hence redirecting significant funding to the frontline. By empowering mainstream schools with resources and autonomy, the model encourages proactive intervention and early identification, preventing needs from escalating and building vital capacity and expertise within inclusive settings. **The ultimate goal is to create a system that focuses on children's outcomes and progress, ensuring support is easily available, without being dependent on a diagnosis or label.** This transformational change would also necessitate easier access to support services via multi-agency hubs (e.g., educational psychologists, speech and language, etc...) and/or an enhanced outreach offer from specialist settings that schools can draw upon, not dependent on a diagnosis or label. **This shift is not about cutting support, it means inclusion by design for all, a more dynamic and proactive universal approach where there is no need to label to intervene, where local collaboration is encouraged, where resources are allocated more dynamically and proactively and where cutting back on the time and money spent in paperwork, in the courts or in transport costs by meeting needs closer to home releases significant resources to the frontline.**

The reform would temporarily require additional funding during the transition but there is significant scope to spend the high needs budget more efficiently and sustainably under a new model.

In the meantime, there are short term measures that schools are already taking to better monitor value for money. Thes include for example using a graduated approach more strategically to inform decisions, reviewing the deployment of the workforce, monitoring the cost and impact of interventions or external providers including transport, reviewing existing EHCPs to assess if funding should remain at previous levels and generally ensure more joined-up working at all levels including between finance and SEND teams.

7) Build a more integrated system with clear roles and responsibilities

The current system suffers from misaligned roles and fragmented working. Education, Health and Social care often operate in silos with varying thresholds and documentation. We need **a more integrated approach with a shared understanding of SEND priorities across education, health, and local government**. This requires revisiting and strengthening the roles and responsibilities of all partners -LAs, health services, education providers, parents, and young people - to ensure greater coherence and joint working. The Department of Health and Social Care should clarify how Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) will prioritise SEND, establishing processes to reduce waiting lists for critical services like CAMHS and speech and language therapy. This requires a different way of accessing these services rather than just streamlining processes/having more staff; so that they can work with schools at a number of levels (including consultative). We should also aim to improve the quality and timeliness of SEND casework with clearer guidance to support casework teams, keep stakeholders engaged through consultations with schools, heads, and parents, and establish clearer agreements for commissioning expectations and monitoring arrangements to hold settings to account. A single unique identifier would help ensure better information sharing, promoting more coordinated provision and synergies between different actors.

8) Strengthen accountability in line with clarified expectations

Once additional resources have been deployed enabling schools to build capacity and capability in the workforce and improve the universal offer, once expectations, roles and responsibilities have been clarified, the accountability system needs to be strengthened to hold schools and local areas to account.   There should be an increased accountability for inclusion at school level, not just at individual level **starting with measures around admissions to ensure schools include pupils reflecting their demographics.** The accountability system should prioritise the progress and achievements of pupils with SEND, including long and short-term outcomes. Inclusion should be embedded **in all aspects of school quality** (leadership, quality of teaching and learning) and not just a standalone element (as proposed within the new Ofsted report cards).   At local area level, the reform should also identify accountability mechanisms **ensuring shared accountability**, where local providers collaborate for the collective success of children and young people. This means moving away from isolated institutional performance towards partnership across education, local government, civic institutions, and employers with a shared commitment to learners flourishing broader than academic success alone.   Local area SEND inspections are still too focused on compliance with the statutory aspects of the SEND reforms. The system should also aim for a **more accessible, less adversarial, and more effective dispute resolution system** that is not solely reliant on legal appeals.

9) Better use of data and proactive place planning

It will be important to develop consistent data definition and collection methods to better plan the offer and to assess how the system is performing.

- **Improved data on forecast demand would help with sufficiency planning** to identify gaps and effectively plan for provision and workforce needs. Whilst independent specialist providers have an important role to play in relation to very specific and complex needs, LAs have too often relied on this expensive provision due to the lack of sufficient specialist-maintained provision. Robust local forecasts could help anticipate demand and reduce reliance on the independent sector.

- **Standardising data collection and methodology** would also help tracking the impact of provision, not just its existence. Crucially, data should follow children through their educational journeys and beyond, enabling analysis of long-term outcomes (including broader qualitative outcomes), transitions, and the effectiveness of early intervention. Integrating data from education, health, and social care would provide a holistic view of each child's support and progress, facilitating a more accurate assessment of the system's ability to deliver timely and effective support.

10)   Rethink the role of the specialist sector

While specialist settings will continue to provide placements for children whose needs are simply too profound to be addressed in mainstream, their role **should expand to offer expertise, training, and outreach to mainstream settings**, bringing specialist knowledge into universal provision.

Clearer thresholds should support a **better triage of needs upstream to ensure specialist setting are used strategically and improve equity in access**.

The role of the independent sector should be reviewed, limiting its use to highly complex, low incidence needs where it complements state-funded provision **ensuring equivalent regulatory standards and funding**.

SEND units and resource bases attached to mainstream schools provide a good middle ground to support the transition to a more inclusive universal offer by meeting the needs closer to home in a dynamic way.

11) Adapt physical infrastructure

To create a truly universal mainstream offer for pupils with SEND, significant improvements to physical infrastructure would be needed. This would involve widespread adaptations to ensure full accessibility as well as building in a greater number of specialist facilities such as sensory rooms, breakout spaces for self-regulation, and quiet areas, and enhanced digital infrastructure and assistive technology. This ambitious undertaking would necessitate substantial and sustained government with new school buildings and capital refurbishments designed to be inclusive from the outset.

12) Better management of transitions and preparation for adulthood

Crucial for long-term success are **clearer expectations around phase transitions** to prevent breakdowns as young people move between educational stages. Improved pathways are needed for young people with SEND into employment and adulthood, including providing internships and enhanced career guidance. Local skills improvement plans should work with employers to **address the SEND employment gap**. The absence of progression pathways is not only detrimental to young people but is also adding further pressure on the high needs block by encouraging students to "stay on" in education because there is little alternative. This funding could therefore be used more strategically to support transitions.

4 Model of change: a well sequenced hybrid decentralised approach with greater collective responsibility

The profound scale of the SEND crisis means that **solutions cannot come solely from top-down national policy**. As Michael Fullan puts it, for reform to truly succeed, we must 'turn the system on its head.' Politicians, regardless of their convictions, simply cannot grasp the intricate complexities at the local level, and governments typically lack the longevity to see such profound transformations through. This sentiment is echoed by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, which links greater inclusion to decentralised models. Such models nurture local initiative, foster cooperation, and allow for crucial adaptability to specific local contexts.

A more effective model for SEND reform would **move away from adversarial approaches and foster collaboration among professionals, schools, and parents who possess invaluable direct experience within the system**. This shift would create much-needed space for **collective problem-**

solving and professional judgment, enabling a **more dynamic** system that can evolve with changing needs. **A particularly promising model involves the development of school clusters** – typically groups of 8-10 cross-phase schools. There are about 15 LAs adopting this kind of approach at present in England. These clusters receive a portion of high-needs funding, with collective decision-making and funding not reliant on EHCPs. This decentralised approach offers numerous benefits, including enhanced peer support, more equitable resource allocation, dynamic funding utilisation for groups rather than just individuals, smoother transitions between educational phases, and reduced administrative burdens that can foster closer links with external agencies.

While such localised initiatives are vital, they often depend heavily on individual leadership. To ensure their widespread impact and sustainability, **these initiatives would require systematic evaluation and consistent national support through regional "communities of practice."**

Strategically sequencing reforms will be crucial. SEND reform is an inherently **complex and interconnected process, demanding a long-term strategic framework with multiple streams of implementation rather than a linear sequence**. Establishing a clear national vision and expectations, building capacity within the system, and increasing school funding must precede any alterations to EHCPs or accountability frameworks. This foundational work is essential to restore parental confidence before any changes to statutory entitlements are considered.

Conclusion: reimagining inclusion for All

The current SEND crisis requires a whole-system, integrated approach to build a truly inclusive education system. The aim is to move from a "deficit model" of SEND, which views it as an individual's flaw, to a "social model," where support is needs-based, readily available, and not contingent on a formal label or diagnosis. This reimagining of inclusion extends beyond children with identified SEND to embrace diversity in its broadest sense, dismantling systemic barriers within the educational landscape for all children.

A fundamental shift is required starting with the establishment of a clear national vision and defined values, alongside explicit expectations for schools regarding provision, resources, and accountability. This necessitates a profound shift in how inclusive education is funded, how the workforce and support services are developed, and how curriculum, pedagogy, and physical environments are adapted with all learners in mind.

The reform is highly complex, and the order in which change is introduced will be critical as well as the level of resources. Significant initial investment is needed to build the capacity for a broader "core offer" of support, with savings expected to accrue in the long term through a rebalanced system. However, additional investment needs to be used proactively and targeted in the right areas.

There is a widely acknowledged fear among parents that changes to the system, particularly around EHCPs, could lead to a removal of support or a lack of recognition of children's needs. Campaigns have emerged, claiming that the "legal rights of disabled children are under threat" if EHCPs are scrapped or scaled back. Parents fear that if the system becomes too broad, individual needs may not be met, and they are concerned about losing the ability to secure necessary support. It is important to acknowledge these fears and provide reassurance that support is maintained and enhanced while transforming the system to be more inclusive and efficient.

This approach aims to restore confidence in the mainstream offer by building its capacity and capability, ensuring greater consistency and quality. The reduction in new EHCPs would then be a

natural outcome of an improved system where more parents feel their children's needs are met through universal and targeted services, reducing the perceived necessity of an EHCP to access additional support.

While initial investment is crucial for building capacity, significant long-term savings are anticipated through a rebalanced, less adversarial system that fosters collaboration among professionals, schools, and parents. The Department for Education should help support and scale effective practices already present within schools and communities, nurturing a new model that champions professionalism. This will promote an education system where all students learn together, learning methods are adapted, teachers are well-equipped, and the curriculum is accessible—all without support being contingent on diagnosis or funding on labels. Parents would retain the crucial safeguard of initiating a needs assessment for an EHCP in cases of significant disagreement. The overall goal is to create a system that is both effective and financially sustainable, where support is needs-based and timely, and every child can thrive in an inclusive environment. This calls for long term protected investment underpinned by cross-party commitment and a shift in how society values an educational system rooted in coherence, and inclusion.

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