



SEND Reforms: GK's View

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After numerous delays, the government has now published its programme of planned reforms to the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system, setting out measures to support earlier intervention of additional needs and drive higher levels of mainstream inclusion. The proposed package of measures is subject to consultation, which is open for responses until 18 May 2026.

This briefing explores the impact of the government's SEND reforms on the education sector and providers, the political complexities of implementing the proposed changes, and practical questions around workforce requirements and funding.

Navigating the fraught political landscape

By Senior Partner, Emma Petela, and Adviser, Noureen Ahmed

It was first reported in March 2025 that a 'schools white paper' was being drawn up by the Department for Education (DfE) which would set out the government's package of intended reforms to the SEND system.

The details of the DfE's reforms, which had originally been pencilled in for publication in autumn 2025, have increasingly been considered 'make or break' for the government. The vulnerability of those in the SEND system and the strength of likely parental opposition should the proposals restrict access to services meant that ministers proceeded with real caution in developing their package of reforms. Nonetheless, issues within the SEND system – including rising costs and variable access to specialist provision – have consistently been met with criticism from local authorities, those working in the sector, parents and parliamentarians who have all called on the government urgently to repair the broken model of support.

Given this context, it is unsurprising that the government's ambition to overhaul the system has been met with considerable political interest. Against a backdrop of rising demand and costs for SEND services, the government faced several challenges to ensure its proposed reforms would be positively received. This included: keeping backbench MPs onside; reassuring families that reforms were not underpinned by a hidden cost savings agenda; and balancing conflicting priorities

across different government departments. Curtailing rising spending on SEND services, led by HM Treasury, at the same time as ensuring improved outcomes for vulnerable individuals, led by DfE, was always going to be the most difficult challenge. The cross-party Education Select Committee also spent most of 2025 working on its own inquiry into SEND and received over 800 written submissions as part of its evidence gathering process, demonstrating the strength of feeling on this issue.

Backbenchers and parliamentarians continue to highlight the range of challenges their constituents and families face when navigating the SEND system, including difficulty accessing high quality SEND support, parents having to fight for their child's needs, and the challenge of finding appropriate local placements. This means the government will face significant scrutiny as its reform agenda continues to take shape, with ministers keen to avoid a 'welfare reforms mark 2' rebellion from backbench Labour MPs and trigger yet another government U-turn. Such an outcome would add to the growing list of contentious issues on which Labour MPs have successfully forced a reversal of policy from the Prime Minister and could pose an existential threat to his survival, especially given Starmer's political vulnerability in the wake of Labour's recent defeat in the Gorton and Denton by-election.

Implementing this package of reforms will be an important test of the government's ability to drive meaningful improvements to a system in urgent need of an overhaul. There is, understandably, nervousness among families and the wider sector given the reforms represent the biggest upheaval to the system in nearly a decade. While initial responses have welcomed the government's commitment to retain education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and improve mainstream inclusion, the government's decision to publish the SEND reform plan as a consultation document has been met with some criticism – particularly around the lack of detail on the timeline for its implementation.

While the government's ambition in attempting to fix the system will be welcomed by many, there is a long way to go – and many political hurdles to overcome – before its reforms can be delivered.

A new role for mainstream settings in delivery SEND provision

By Head of Policy, Hugo Tuckett

At the heart of the government's proposed changes to the SEND system is an ambitious pledge to drive higher levels of mainstream inclusion. Ministers believe that higher levels of mainstream inclusion will improve outcomes for children with SEND and have published research which shows that children with SEND in mainstream settings achieve half a grade better at GCSE compared to their peers in special schools. The DfE wants to make the mainstream system inclusive by default and has specified that only those with the most complex needs will be catered to in specialist settings. The SEND consultation outlines three levels of support that will be available to individuals with additional needs:

- **Targeted:** Available to children and young people who have ongoing and commonly occurring needs which cannot typically be met by its wider 'Universal' offer. The support provided under this level may include small group interventions to develop language skills, or pre-teaching key vocabulary to help individuals access the curriculum.
- **Targeted Plus:** Available for children and young people who need more specialist support in mainstream education. This could include access to additional support from education and health professionals, and potentially time-limited support in an alternative provision or specialist setting to allow for their needs to be assessed and addressed before reintegrating back into a mainstream setting.
- **Specialist:** Only available to those with the most complex needs with support based on nationally defined packages of support called 'Specialist Provision Packages'. These packages will set out exactly what interventions, resources and standards are required to meet an individual's needs, and will cover curriculum adaptations, extra services, therapies and resources that will guide what is included in a child or young person's EHCP. Under the government's proposals, only children that fall into the specialist level of support will be eligible for an EHCP in future.

The government intends for all those with Targeted or Targeted Plus plans to be supported in mainstream settings, which will be given additional funding to make provision more accessible to those with SEND. This includes £1.6 billion over the next three years through the government's Inclusive Mainstream Fund and £1.8 billion over the next three years through its Experts at Hand service. The former will aim to help settings build a core offer for children and young people with SEND and to help identify commonly occurring needs and 'take meaningful steps to improve everyday support'. The latter is intended to join up services and wrap health and care around education settings so that children can access the therapies and interventions they need 'without drawn-out bureaucracy'.

The government has also committed to make £3.7 billion of funding available up to 2030 to make school buildings more accessible, as well as create new special school places and 'tens of thousands' of new places in 'Inclusion Bases' in mainstream settings. The government has said its proposed inclusion bases will ensure more children have the opportunity to be educated in a local mainstream setting. Funding can be used to adapt buildings and buy equipment to make the school estate more inclusive and accessible. This could include, for example, providing breakout or sensory spaces where children can 'regulate, improving ventilation to create a more comfortable sensory environment.'

The government's programme of reforms points to a much more significant role for mainstream settings in the delivery of SEND provision. While additional funding is being made available to deliver on this objective, the scale of the government's ambition should not be understated. High and rising demand for EHCPs has created considerable financial pressures which the government's proposals do not clearly address. For example, there is a projected (and currently unaccounted for) £6 billion overspend on SEND services due to hit central government budgets from 2028-29. This comes after the Treasury committed to take on responsibility for funding the SEND system once the statutory override, the mechanism which keeps SEND deficits off local authority balance sheets, comes to an end. By this date, local authorities are also likely to have accrued several

billions of pounds worth of additional debts financing local SEND services. This is in spite of the government's announcement in February that it would wipe out 90% of accrued debts up to 2025-26.

The government will therefore need its proposed reforms to increase mainstream participation in a significant way if it is to have any hope of keeping these rising costs under control and putting the SEND system on a sustainable financial footing. It will need to do this while balancing rising demand for specialist provision and pressure from parents who have over recent years increasingly seen EHCPs as the only route to accessing additional support.

Future-proofing the SEND workforce

By Associate, Sophie Duley

The government's SEND reforms and accompanying schools white paper recognise that increasing the recruitment of teachers and providing robust training are fundamental to tackling the SEND crisis. The DfE believes that improving recruitment pathways and boosting access to high quality training are key to ensuring that children with SEND whose needs can be met in mainstream schools receive the support they need. A key delivery commitment outlined in the white paper is to recruit 6,500 more expert teachers in secondary schools, special schools and further education (FE) colleges – the finer detail of which has been outlined in a separate '6,500 additional teachers delivery plan'.

In recent years, there has been an increasingly insufficient number of trained professionals equipped to meet the complex needs of children with SEND. A recent National Education Union survey found that 69% of teachers identified school staffing shortages as a 'significant barrier' to inclusive SEND provision. To address this, the schools white paper outlines core measures including over £40 million invested over three years to grow the educational psychology and speech and language therapy workforce, and a commitment to continue work to reform statutory pay and conditions for teachers and remove the ceiling on pay.

Recruitment alone will not solve the problem. The white paper places equal emphasis on training and retaining the existing workforce, including investing in a new teacher retention programme from autumn 2026. Supporting the professional development for existing teachers will be essential in ensuring that mainstream schools can accommodate children with SEND, and the DfE will need to draw upon the expertise of special and alternative provision schools to help deliver this objective. However, teaching unions, such as the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), have noted that the reliance on special and alternative provision schools to provide mainstream settings with this training may prove a challenge as they are often very different in size and setup to mainstream schools – 'precisely because their pupils require such settings'.

The white paper stresses that training must be embedded into every phase of a teacher's career. This approach focuses on measures such as introducing new training packages on inclusion for

support staff and promoting research into how schools deploy their support staff in evidence-based ways to deliver the best outcomes for children. Training is particularly critical in promoting early intervention and essential in ensuring that teachers are trained to recognise early signs of SEND. This will enable teachers to adapt their teaching practices to make them as inclusive as possible, supporting the government's aim of improving inclusivity in classrooms and putting additional support in place at the earliest possible stage of a child's life.

The emphasis on early intervention aligns with the broader aim of improving outcomes for those in the SEND system. In practice, this will mean that children with SEND are more likely to remain within mainstream settings, but it will not remove the need for specialist settings entirely. This approach is intended to support the wider aim of reducing local authority spending pressures on special schools, while ensuring the best possible outcomes for all children.

The recent publication of the Education Estates Strategy underlines the government's emphasis on inclusion within mainstream settings, by creating an estate that is 'inclusive by design'. The 10-year strategy states that every secondary school will have 'inclusion bases', which will offer specialist provision in mainstream schools, colleges and nurseries, ensuring that pupils can access targeted support that 'bridges the gap between mainstream and specialist provision'.

Although the issue of teacher recruitment has been somewhat overshadowed by concerns over the sufficiency of funding and the SEND system's financial sustainability, it remains a vital consideration when seeking to drive higher levels of mainstream inclusion. By prioritising recruitment and training, the government has set out a clear vision for ensuring that all teachers are equipped to support the needs of children with SEND effectively at an early stage of their education.

Next steps

By Adviser, Mariella Turley

The government's consultation on its proposed SEND reforms, which is open for responses until 18 May 2026, is seeking input from children and young people, families, teachers and school leaders, alongside other interested parties to inform the development of its proposals. The consultation focuses on five core themes:

- Inclusive education
- 'Targeted' and 'Targeted Plus' levels of SEND support in mainstream settings
- 'Specialist Provision Packages' for children with the most complex needs
- Placing children and families at the centre of the SEND system
- Transition to the new system, which will span from 2026 to 2035

Although the government has laid out a transition timetable for its proposed new SEND system, its phased approach means that a significant proportion of the reforms are unlikely to be implemented before 2029 at the earliest. Any reforms that are introduced over the remainder of this



parliamentary term (2024-2029) are likely to be minor and focused on putting the necessary foundational elements in place to ensure a smooth transition to the new system.

The upcoming general election, expected in 2029, and Labour's perilous position in the polls has also been an important consideration for ministers keen not to implement contentious policies that risk alienating voters. This is even more significant following Labour's loss to the Green Party in the Gorton and Denton by-election on 26 February. The DfE is adopting a cautious approach to developing the consultation's proposals to ensure parents, providers, school leaders and other interested parties have an opportunity to feed into the policymaking process to avoid a potentially damaging political fallout for the government.

Crucially, the proposed implementation timeline will hinge on the outcome of the 2029 general election. The government's plans have already faced backlash from the Liberal Democrats, who argue that there is not a sufficiently detailed plan for improving inclusivity in mainstream settings, meaning SEND reform could very quickly emerge as the defining issue of the electoral contest. If the government wants these reforms to have any chance of being implemented post-2029, it is vital that ministers dedicate sufficient time to establishing a cross-party consensus in this area. Otherwise, we risk treading water for several years before ripping up the plans and starting afresh.

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