

Meeting the increasing challenges of SEND provision in schools



The number of children and young people with SEND is increasing, putting pressure on provision and facilities within mainstream primary and secondary schools. A best practice roundtable brought together experts to hear advice, examples of good practice, and ideas for how we can meet these challenges...

Getting SEND provision right in mainstream schools

There are an estimated 1.7 million children and young people in England who have some form of SEND – and the numbers are growing year-on-year (DfE, 2024a). At the same time, challenges relating to the implementation of the 2015 SEND Code of Practice and a lack of sufficient funding to support increasingly complex needs have left many schools in a difficult position.

As more and more children and young people require specialist support, so already-stretched budgets are struggling to keep up – with particular challenges being caused due to delays in the time it takes students to be assessed for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) – which bring with them vital funding.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported earlier this year (Sibieta, 2024) that the number of pupils with the highest levels of documented SEND increased by more than 60% from 220,000 in 2015 to 360,000 in 2022: “This was mostly driven by a near-doubling in the number of pupils recorded as having autism, speech and language needs, and social, emotional, and mental health needs. This has driven a £3.5bn increase in the high needs budget, which has used up nearly half of the £7.6bn increase in school spending since 2015.”

Indeed, early identification remains a challenge, with some children waiting years to access assessments and tests to diagnose their SEND. Of the 1.7 million with SEND, just 434,354 have an EHCP – up 11.6% since 2023. The number of pupils with SEND but without an EHCP stands at 1,238,851 – up 4.7% since 2023 (DfE, 2024a).

EHCP requests are meant to be assessed within 20 weeks, but in 2023 only 50% were completed within this timeframe – a slight improvement on 49% in 2022 (DfE, 2024b).

It means that school leaders are

having to be increasingly creative about how they use the limited funding they have to provide the necessary support and facilities to allow children with SEND to effectively access mainstream education.

Recruitment and training of staff remains a challenge for schools, too, particularly recruiting specialist teachers. Teacher training institutions will admit that too little time is spent on SEND in what is already a tight curriculum, and many SENCOs fall into the role by accident because there is no one else available.

In smaller schools, a head or deputy will often double up as a SENCO because budgets and staffing levels don’t allow for the recruitment of a specialist member of staff.

On top of this, a lack of specialist facilities and long waits for external support exacerbate problems. And of course all this has been made worse by Covid-19, with a huge increase in mental health problems (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2023) putting greater pressure on schools.

“A lack of adequate funding is not the only problem facing schools – a lack of specialist facilities, a lack of specialist teachers, and long waits for external support can exacerbate concerns”

The roundtable

It was in this context that *SecEd*, *Headteacher Update*, and *The SEND Network* – in partnership with TG Escapes – brought together 12 educational professionals for an in-depth discussion of the challenges faced by the SEND system and the potential solutions that mainstream schools might consider.

The discussion took place in September, chaired by *SecEd* and *Headteacher Update* editor Pete

Henshaw. Around the table were a range of experts and experienced SEND professionals from both mainstream schools and the special and alternative provision sector (see panel opposite).

The challenges we face

One of the first challenges identified as the discussion kicked off was that schools are increasingly reporting a range of diverse SEND, with difficulties ensuring early diagnosis and intervention. Often SEND become apparent only when children begin school for the first time.

Among the increasing SEND that participants are seeing in their schools, delayed speech and language development stood out, particularly among new school starters who were babies and toddlers during the pandemic.

Indeed, while autism remains the most common type of special need among children who have an EHCP (33%), official figures tell us that 26% of those on SEN Support have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Other common needs include



MEET OUR EXPERTS

The roundtable discussion took place on September 25, 2024, in central London and brought together 12 experts from mainstream schools, specialist and alternative provision, and the wider education sector. Pictured (clockwise from left) are:

Pete Henshaw (chair): Editor of *SecEd* and *Headteacher Update*

Ali Williams: Deputy headteacher at Foxfields Academy in Leicestershire, an SEMH school, part of the Community Inclusive Trust

Maryum Qureshi: Deputy headteacher and SENCO at Cyril Jackson Primary School in London, part of the University Schools Trust

Emma McCay: SENCO at St Paul’s Way School, an all-through school in London, part of the University Schools Trust

Steve Baker OBE: Chief executive of The

People’s Learning Trust, including Everton Free School, an alternative provision which supports vulnerable young people

Sophie Vowles: SENCO and assistant headteacher at St Mary’s CE School in Truro

Harry Wilkins: An architect who works with TG Escapes, a modular building manufacturer working in education

Dorothy Lepkowska (writer): An education journalist with experience covering a range of issues including inclusion and SEND

Lisa Oliver: SENCO at Uppingham Community College in Rutland

Liz Zoccolan: SENCO and assistant head at Harrogate Grammar School, part of the Red Kite Learning Trust. Trust lead for SEND and chair of the Red Kite Alliance secondary SENCO Curriculum Learning Community

Jennifer Duncan: Deputy CEO and trust lead for SEND at Tees Valley Education, a multi-academy trust serving communities in the North East of England. Executive headteacher at Discovery Special Academy in Middlesbrough

Amanda Wright: Head of Whole School SEND with Nasen, a membership organisation that supports and champions those working with children and young people with SEND and learning differences. Former SENCO and senior leader

Mark Brown: Consultant at TG Escapes, a modular building manufacturer working in education

Conrad Bourne (not pictured): Director for SEND at The Mercian Trust, a diverse family of nine schools including alternative provision. Deputy regional lead for the West Midlands at Whole School SEND

moderate learning difficulties (such as dyslexia) and social, emotional and mental health needs (DfE, 2024a).

Our participants agreed that interventions from already stretched external services, including speech and language provision, are often difficult to access. In this regard, they were clear that system-wide reform is needed.

Conrad Bourne, director for SEND at The Mercian Trust in the West Midlands, explained that many local authorities have lost specialist staff and schools have often had to pick up the slack without any additional funding: “Schools have had to be very creative,” he added.

Mr Bourne also pointed to much

more complex special needs arriving in schools due to advances in healthcare, which have led to children with significant conditions now surviving infancy and into childhood when perhaps 30 years ago they might not have done.

Behaviour was another issue raised by participants. Teachers are reporting a rise in disruptive behaviour at increasingly younger ages, with children less able to self-regulate and manage their emotions. And this would seem to be another issue exacerbated by the pandemic and lockdowns, with months of isolation having taken away crucial early opportunities for play and peer interaction.

The delay in assessment and

diagnoses caused by lockdowns have also played a part, delaying intervention and support for many pupils who are now in the school system.

Participants noted that the rise in challenging behaviours coincided with the end of the Sure Start programme and local children’s centres, which lost their funding during the austerity years.

Recent years have also seen a rise in issues such as anxiety, depression, and eating disorders in children and young people. Sometimes these come on top of existing learning difficulties.

And these issues are affected by the influence of social media, too, and the increased time spent on screens by young people.

Ali Williams, deputy

headteacher at Foxfields Academy in Leicestershire, an SEMH school, noted that social media was having an increasingly negative impact on children and young people’s mental health, which affected the complexity of challenges schools have to tackle.

“This is a factor with growing up now. It causes young people to behave in certain ways,” he added.

All of these factors, the discussion heard, have resulted in increased pressure on external services and increasingly complex needs being presented by students in mainstream settings.

Addressing the challenges

Faced with stretched budgets and reduced support from cash-strapped local authorities and





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'The best facilities are those that are welcoming and look after the learning environment'
Steve Baker, chief executive, The People's Learning Trust

over-stretched external specialists, schools and multi-academy trusts are having to think and act creatively in how they spend what little money they have to support students.

A key theme during the discussion was that a culture of inclusion across the school, where every teacher considers themselves a teacher of SEND and every leader a leader of SEND, is key to improving outcomes – and often building this culture does not have to cost the earth. The discussion touched upon a number of core areas in this regard.

Teacher expertise
The participants have all focused their work on supporting teachers to develop their knowledge and expertise, with the SENCO taking a strategic role to drive this.

Lisa Oliver, SENCO at Uppingham Community College in Rutland, for example, explained how she has worked to raise the profile of SEND and support CPD: "We used the Nasen SEND Teacher Handbook alongside educational

psychologists to deliver our SEND CPD. There is not a generic strategy – maths is very different to PE, for example – so we asked department leads to come up with what they do well, with neurodiverse children for example, and what they need help on and we're creating a SEND toolkit that is department-based."

The toolkit is child-focused and is currently being embedded across the school. Ms Oliver is also working to get the balance right in terms of how much information to

give to teachers about children who have EHCPs.

She explained: "There's a fine line between giving teachers too little information and expecting them to read a 39-page document. We've tried to do something that's still quite detailed, which gives a real background to who the child is and links into the teaching and learning strategies. Bringing in external psychologists has given it more (credibility). It has been very well received."

Given the prevalence of SLCNs, Maryum Qureshi, deputy headteacher and SENCO at Cyril Jackson Primary School in east London, which includes a specialist Speech and Language Base, explained how they offer opportunities for staff to work alongside speech and language therapists and other experts.

"Our focus has been how to improve the knowledge and skills of the teachers so they can understand what sort of interventions are effective and understand what methods speech and language therapists use.

"We went through a two-year programme of ensuring that every teacher and teaching assistant knew about things like shape-coding in English (a visual way to

teach grammar). This had a huge impact on the progress pupils were making but has also encouraged joint working."

Some of the schools around the table recommend staff learning groups, which are allocated time to engage with relevant materials or research and put it into practice. This might include looking at a range of strategies to meet the needs of different types of SEND and to increase wider understanding of effective teaching methods.

Ms Qureshi added: "Having the opportunity to share practice through learning groups is really important. It is absolutely (crucial) for staff in schools to be able to observe each other."

Participants agreed that CPD around specific SEND conditions was not the most efficient approach. Instead, learning effective inclusion strategies which can help all children in the classroom should be the priority.

Colleagues often repeated the adage: "What is good for a child with SEND is good for every child."

Mr Williams said: "A big thing for mainstream schools, certainly for teachers, I think in terms of SEMH is that they are sometimes almost looking for an instruction manual

for a specific child and I don't think that exists, or certainly it doesn't solve the problem.

"In terms of supporting those needs, it has to be top-down from the head and leadership team. It has to be that cultural switch and largely that is free – it doesn't have to cost anything."

The roundtable heard about the importance of creating and using networks and sharing ideas between practitioners about what works.

Jennifer Duncan, deputy CEO at Tees Valley Education and executive headteacher at Discovery Special Academy in Middlesbrough, explained: "Sharing good practice, sharing ideas about training and CPD is vital – what is really important is that we share with and learn from each other.

"It doesn't have to be big changes and bells and whistles – often it is the small changes that can make a big difference to a child and that is what is so valuable, as well as making professionals feel empowered to be able to make a difference, even if it is just to one young person."

Supporting the SENCO role
SENCOs and other professionals who work with children and young people with SEND must be looked after, Ms Duncan continued, because of the potential impact of the pressures of the job.

She explained: "SENCOs need to be mindful of their own wellbeing, and possibly there needs to be some sort of supervision, like there is with pastoral and safeguarding teams now, because they are often working with families who are in a highly emotional state about aspects of a child's health and education that are difficult and challenging. Collaboration and networking already address this to some extent, but it needs to be more formal."

Liz Zoccolan, trust lead for SEND at the Red Kite Learning Trust and assistant head and SENCO at Harrogate Grammar School, added: "There is need for much deeper understanding at leadership level about the SENCO role. There are discrepancies across the system where in one school there is trust and understanding of the role, they are given strategic opportunities, and

are heard and listened to, but another SENCO will have a very different experience.

"This woolly phrase (in the SEND Code of Practice) about how SENCOs should be on the senior leadership team – why is this not happening across the board? Why are the leaders above them not being held to account in terms of ensuring that this role is protected?"

Ms Qureshi echoed the sentiment: "It is all about shifting the culture – all teachers are teachers of SEND and all leaders are leaders of SEND. In order to have that cultural shift there are a few factors. One is having the time as a SENCO to think like a strategic leader and not being over-run with the admin side of the role. Two, it is just impossible to bring that whole-school shift as a SENCO if you're a middle leader – it should be a must that the SENCO is on the senior leadership team to bring about that change."

The appointment of a full-time EHCP coordinator at the Red Kite Learning Trust is one example of how the SENCO can be supported. Ms Zoccolan explained how this has freed up SENCOs across the trust to better manage the day-to-day provision of education.

Another development is that schools are increasingly asking for their senior leaders to have specific SEND experience. In some MATs, we heard, prospective headteachers must demonstrate experience of being a SENCO when applying for a headship, or at least show examples at interview of initiatives that they have led around SEND provision.

Emma McCay, SENCO at St Paul's Way School in east London, discussed the creation of a SEND Hub across her trust's schools and the impact this has had for the team of SENCOs. They meet once a term and it has led to collaboration on common challenges, including paperwork, as well as the chance to observe good practice and effective cross-phase working between secondary and primary SENCOs. It also offers great support for new SENCOs.

'It means that we can refer and assess students within 10 days on all pathways'
Conrad Bourne, director for SEND, The Mercian Trust



'We are trying to bridge that gap for children with SEND who have to stay in the mainstream'
Emma McCay, SENCO, St Paul's Way School

External services in-house
For the last three years or so, the Mercian Trust has sped up assessments and diagnoses of SEND by bringing clinical services directly into schools.

Mr Bourne explained that the MAT structure has allowed them to "take control". In this example, the MAT began engaging with training providers and universities which were training clinical students.

"I said, we have 5,000 children here with whom you could work. Within three months we had our first art therapy student from Chester University coming to work with us."

Three years on, and the MAT has helped to train 65 clinicians from 10 different universities on clinical placements in areas such as art therapy, music and drama therapies, children's nursing, mental health professionals, speech and language therapists...

Mr Bourne added: "The success enabled me to gather a lot of

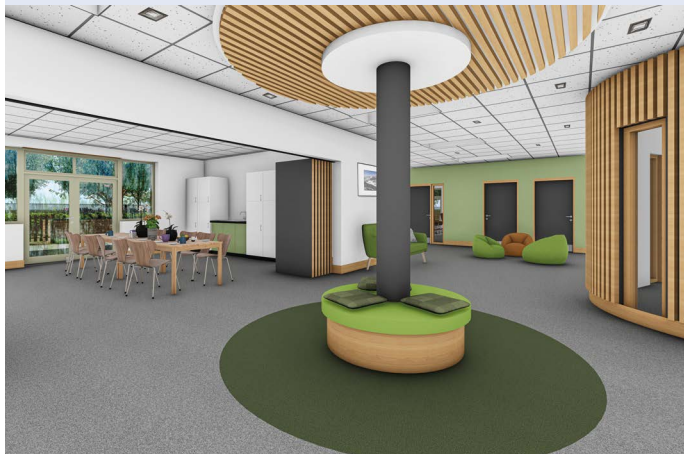
evidence to show the impact these clinicians made and then to ask for funding to recruit our own healthcare professionals.

"We've got five speech and language therapists, four occupational therapists, and two occupational therapist assistants, as well as a music therapist and an art therapist. Some of the staff are full-time and work in the NHS and that has enabled us to access a broader range of clinical services."

One area where these professionals have helped the trust is with screenings and assessments. Mr Bourne added: "We've brought down our autism assessment to 26 weeks, when the NICE target is 32 weeks. Our occupational therapists, meanwhile, are doing amazing work around dialectical behaviour therapy. It is expensive, but it means we can refer and assess students within 10 days on all pathways. Our CAMHS referrals are now more bespoke, too. ➤



ADAPTABLE INCLUSIVE LEARNING HUBS



by Mark Brown, consultant, TG Escapes

TG Escapes recognises the complexities faced by schools working to ensure the best possible provision for children and young people with SEND and we were delighted to partner with *SecEd*, *Headteacher Update*, and *The SEND Network* to host this fascinating roundtable discussion.

TG Escapes is committed to being part of the solution for schools and our approach centres on designing quick, cost-effective building solutions that meet immediate needs but also look toward a sustainable future.

Following an initial stage of comprehensive research, consulting with local authorities, mainstream and specialist schools, and SEND experts, TG Escapes formed a collaboration with SEND specialist architects Haverstock Associates, The Blue Iris Partnership, and Terra Firma Landscape Architects. This expert team has crafted pre-designed modular building schemes that can meet the needs of different settings providing suitable provision for students with increasingly complex SEND in both primary and secondary schools.

We were grateful to have the opportunity to share these designs at the roundtable for discussion and feedback, and following this conversation the designs have been refined taking into account some of the themes raised.

The aim is to keep specialist provision within mainstream schools wherever possible, facilitating inclusive education with flexible spaces.

The designs follow biophilic principles, maximising natural light and ventilation, using sustainable materials, and creating strong visual connections to outdoor planting and landscaping.

Each building is organised around a central activity area, with classrooms designed to offer children and young people a choice of spaces, both inside and outside, where they can retreat to support their learning and sensory comfort. These options allow students to find environments that best meet their needs, fostering emotional regulation and creating a supportive atmosphere.

Additionally, the options of therapy, sensory, and meeting spaces provide multi-disciplinary teams with a high-quality environment where they can effectively collaborate and support their work with children. The designs include a variety of spaces which can be used to support students with a range of needs including ASD, ADHD, MSI, and SEMH.

The requirements of the Department for Education Output Specification are thorough and demanding, ensuring that educational buildings meet the necessary standards for design, construction, and operational performance.

Our 16 and 32-place concepts meet Spec-21 standards for robustness, fire safety, acoustics, sustainability, and adaptability. The net-zero 32-place setting including secure outdoor spaces can be completed in 30 weeks on-site at a cost of £75,000 per-student.

For further details, you can visit <https://tgescapes.co.uk/>



“We have integrated all of this vertically which means everything can be done so much quicker. The result is that attendance and behaviour have improved and, while there is still work to do, we don’t really need to access external clinical services now.”

Student voice

The roundtable heard about the importance of listening to our students.

Amanda Wright, head of Whole School SEND at Nasen, explained how their work was guided by a young person’s advisory group and its insights were often striking.

“We’ve been talking to them about preparation for adulthood and they have been telling us what they need – they need to be able to order a taxi to get them to their activities, how to fill in a form, they need sex and relationships education, it is so important to them. But these things might be add-ons in mainstream schools.

“We need to make sure we are speaking to young people about what they feel they need and how our provision can meet their needs.”

“While some of those things will have financial implications, if we can do them effectively the long-term outcome is a reduction in cost and better outcomes for the children”

The physical environment

A large part of the discussion focused on the physical learning environment in schools, given the impact this can have for many students with SEND, especially neurodiverse young people.

Steve Baker, chief executive of The People’s Learning Trust, which includes Everton Free School, an alternative provision supporting vulnerable young people, said that the importance of creating a welcoming environment must not be underestimated.

“Many students often feel they’ve failed already and then

‘It gives a real background to who the child is and links into the teaching and learning strategies’
Lisa Oliver, SENCO, Uppingham Community College

they’re sent to another provision which is absolutely abhorrent,” he said. “The best facilities are those that are welcoming and look after the learning environment by doing things like fixing broken windows and painting over graffiti.

“You need those places to look nice because you want the kids to develop trust and relationships, and once you have that the young people become engaged and ‘bothered’ about their education.”

Often it is the simple, easy fixes that can make a difference to a learning space and the children and teachers in it. For example, some schools no longer have bells to announce changes of lesson, as the noise proves distressing for neurodiverse students. Instead, satellite-controlled clocks can ensure that class times are synchronised across a school.

Many schools ensure that lighting and acoustics are not disruptive to learning, including using suspended acoustic ceilings – which participants described as “brilliant” – and other methods to keep noise to a minimum.

Avoiding the glare and noise of strip-lighting is also recommended and schools can install lighting that can be adjusted between “warm” and “cool” to create different ambiances to suit different SEND – especially in sensory rooms or quiet areas.

Sophie Vowles, SENCO and assistant headteacher at St Mary’s CE School in Truro, said: “We have a child in year 6 with a cochlear implant. We looked at all of our classrooms and how we can reduce that auditory feedback (noise) and we’ve put things like partitions in big rooms.”

Participants discussed how schools built more recently often have large open-plan spaces, which can be distracting and over-stimulating for children, including those with special needs.

Sliding glass doors or partitions, however, can be installed to help break-up these larger spaces, minimise noise and calm busy lessons, while continuing to provide natural light.



Other ideas included converting unused cupboard or storage spaces to quiet corners, with soft furnishings and lighting for pupils who need to self-regulate.

Colleagues noted that such facilities should be available for everyone to use – not just neurodiverse students and staff.

Elsewhere, standing desks can be useful for children who have ADHD and who may need to get up and move around during a lesson.

Meanwhile, in classrooms, space can be divided into zones for different types of work. Mr Williams explained: “We recommend zoning especially for neurodiverse children so they have a set zone to do their work, a specific zone for their sensory break and almost coding that within their timetable so they know the pathway and they learn that when they go to this area then it’s work time.”

This approach can work for playgrounds as well, colleagues agreed.

Elsewhere, the use of animals, where possible, can also have a big

‘We looked at all of our classrooms and how we can reduce that auditory feedback’
Sophie Vowles, assistant headteacher and SENCO, St Mary’s CE School

impact, and we heard anecdotes of schools adopting hens, rabbits, the use of therapy dogs, and even raising piglets!

Ms Vowles emphasised the vital role of the physical environment, including the design of classrooms, and how thinking seriously about our learning spaces can help to remove some of the root causes of pupil dysregulation. She added: “While some of those things will have financial implications, if we can do them effectively the long-term outcome is a reduction in cost and better outcomes for the children.”

Mark Brown, a consultant with TG Escapes, explained the impact that school design and the choice of building materials can have in creating the right environment: “There is now a lot of research that



shows how timber classrooms reduce heart rate and we have evidence that mental health and wellbeing improves no end in a biophilic environment.” Mr Brown also cited the importance of natural light in classroom and learning spaces.

Other advice and ideas

A number of other ideas were suggested during the discussion:

Rest breaks: Taking a two-minute break during lessons to allow children to stretch their legs helps young people to regain concentration. Ms Zoccolan explained: “We found more and more children were struggling to concentrate and manage anxiety in the lessons. So we normalised in a 55-minute lesson taking a couple of rest breaks just for a minute or two to stretch your legs. It made such a difference.”

A good kitchen: Mr Baker noted that having a good chef and a good kitchen is “really important”, feeding students nutritious food at breakfast and lunch – especially for neurodiverse young people: “Giving students the right food will

have a really big impact on them in the long-term. To be honest it has an impact on the staff too!”

A digital classroom: Ms Vowles described the Digital Classroom Connection (DCC) at St Mary’s CE School which allows overwhelmed pupils to continue to access teaching: “Pupils who find the classroom over-stimulating can use Microsoft Teams in our quiet, calming nurture classroom to access their learning.

“This provision is facilitated by a team of teaching assistants who use split headphones to sit beside children and offer encouragement and support on a one-to-one basis.

“The deployment of DCC has seen many benefits, including the fact that children who were not able to access the classroom are now receiving quality first teaching and the same level of education as their peers.”

The same approach is used for things like assemblies, which some children can find too loud and over-stimulating.

Access points: Schools which use quiet, nurture spaces to help students to calm or take time out

should consider having different points of access to such spaces. This way, if parents/carers do need to be called to school then they can access the space more easily or children can leave calmly without having to head back through the busy school.

Behaviour curriculum: At Uppingham Community College, Ms Oliver described the creation of a behaviour curriculum by the pastoral and SEND teams. The idea is to teach students things like why we wear a uniform, why we line up, or why we might be challenged in corridors: “For SEND students who need that consistency and understanding it aligns really nicely. Personal development education time in the morning is spent understanding why we behave in the way we behave.”

Transition: When year 6 pupils are due to move to secondary school, using a video camera to film a tour of the secondary school is an effective way of introducing the new environment in a non-stressful way.

Support from Nasen: Whole

School SEND, hosted by Nasen, has free information, resources and CPD for teachers and support staff, funded by the Department for Education. It comes highly recommended by participants.

This article has been compiled by Dorothy Lepkowska, a freelance education journalist, based on the discussions at the roundtable event in September 2024.



INFORMATION & REFERENCES

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