

Early Years SEND Inclusion Reform Recommendations



Current Situation

Despite the importance of this stage of education, we are currently failing children with SEND and their families in the early years.

Coram's Annual Childcare Survey in 2025 found that only 4% of local authority areas felt they have enough early years provision for all children with SEND.

This is a drop from 18% in 2023, showing a dramatic worsening in access to early years provision. Action is needed now to put early years SEND at the heart of the SEND reforms. Not only will this drive wider inclusion across the education system, give children the best chance to thrive, and build the confidence of families in the mainstream system, but it will also reduce long term spending on SEND in the primary and secondary education stages.

Settings have raised concerns about the difficulty and slow speed of accessing sufficient funding to support children with SEND, lack of training and confidence among educators to meet the needs of all children, and slow access to specialist input. This is against the rising numbers of children with SEND, which consists of both increased levels of need and also a broadening range of need. If we cannot build the capacity of the early years sector to support every child at the earliest point, we cannot hope for families to have faith and trust that their child will get the support they need, which is necessary for a successful inclusive education system

“Waiting lists are a massive problem, appointments are few and far between. There’s a lack of provision, patience, awareness of needs and capability in mainstream education settings.”

Parent of a child with SEND, when asked about the barriers they face



54%

Families who said their level of trust in the education system was low or very low

67%

Families who have struggled to access support for their child from their local authority

Families are concerned that even once a child is in a setting there is a big difference between simply being in the room, and actually experiencing meaningful inclusive practice. They report feeling that settings don't always have the right knowledge and confidence to be able to deliver high quality support and education.

Settings must offer every child a strong graduated approach, whereby they actively work to understand the child and offer support in areas of identified need, until they learn what works for each individual. This should happen alongside requests for specialist input where needed, to reduce delays to getting the right support and reassure parents that professionals are working in partnership.

Currently, an increasing number of parents are reporting that when their child transitions to school, they are having difficulty finding a provision which can meet their needs, and are often turned away if they do not have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in place. This is leading to a rise in deferrals which results in greater social challenges for children with SEND who don't transition at the same time as their peers.

29%

**Families who have been
turned away from a setting
- up from 20% in 2023**

41%

**Children who are not
accessing their full
entitlements**

Dingley's Promise research April 2025



Recommendations for improvements in early years inclusion

Funding

SEND Inclusion Funding (SENIF) must be expanded to provide support to children with the highest levels of need, without removing it for those with low and emerging needs, who will still be able to benefit from a strong graduated approach as outlined in local Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP) documents. This would give families an option of simple-to-access funding for their child in the early years, regardless of whether they have an EHCP or not. It takes pressure off families and settings, while ensuring children get the high quality early intervention they need at the earliest opportunity.

Ring fencing of High Needs Block (HNB) Funding for the Early Years must be prioritised. Despite written clarification from the DfE, many local authorities are still not using HNB funding to fund early years support for children with high needs. Investing in our youngest children with high needs gives them the best start, reassures families that needs can be met without the need for an EHCP, reduces pressure on spending later in the education system, and frees up early years funding to support children with low and emerging needs.

Establishing transition funding in all local areas to enhance transitions from early years to school. The transitions process is vital for all children but even more so for children with SEND. A fund dedicated to this is required to support the early years setting and the reception class to work in partnership to deliver high quality enhanced transitions. This also ensures that where an EHCP has not yet been secured, the child can still access their choice of school at the right time, with funding in place.

The simple delinking of Disability Access Funding (DAF) and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) would mean that more settings can quickly access DAF enabling them to include children and meet needs promptly. DAF should be given as a matter of process to any child starting at a setting who has involvement from a SEND professional, taking pressure off families to go through the deficit-focused process of applying for DLA.

Systems

Standardised guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) on OAP, SENIF, Data, Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) and needs assessment processes. Currently these key documents and systems are designed locally, duplicating time and effort and leading to a complex system, especially for families and professionals who engage with more than one local authority area. Local authorities are in need of clear guidance from the DfE rather than spending time and resources developing their own version of common documents.

Move the responsibility for leading EHCP processes in the early years from settings back to local authority teams. Settings do not have the resources and in some cases the expertise to be able to manage the process of securing EHCPs and then organising regular reviews. In the past, this was a responsibility of the local authority and in order to reduce pressure on settings, the process needs to return to local authority leadership. Early years inclusion teams in local authorities continue to be a key contributor to good outcomes for children as they can support settings, ensure children are getting their entitlements, help with access to specialist input and liaise with schools to smooth the transition process.

An Ofsted inspection framework for settings that rewards strong inclusive practice is needed. This should feature celebratory language, close links to OAP and CSA data, joint working with local authorities, and a strong common understanding among inspectors of what inclusion in the early years looks like.

Quality

Mandatory inclusion training for the whole sector is crucial. It is widely agreed that to improve provision for children with SEND, every educator needs the confidence and knowledge to support them effectively through strong inclusive practice. A key reason for educators leaving the sector is their lack of confidence that they can effectively support children with SEND. This will help with retention of staff at a time of staffing crisis for the sector, reassure families that settings are able to give their children the best start, and ensure early years educators are recognised and valued for the skills they bring and impact they have.

The value of Early Years Specialist Settings must be recognised as a critical part of the whole SEND system but must be quality controlled, and focused on building inclusion. There is currently little direction for alternative provision in the early years in terms of its role, what it looks like, and elements of quality assurance. Where this provision is closely integrated with local authority systems and aims to give as many children as possible the opportunity to access mainstream education, it can ensure every child can access the best early support and intervention.



Inclusion is everyone's responsibility, please join us in pledging to support the following urgent calls to action:

Ministers and Policy decision makers

- Delink DAF and DLA in the short term, while waiting for full review of the early years SEND funding system that should include a high needs strand of SENIF funding and transition funding as standard.
- Fully assess the potential impact of all new early years policy on children with SEND and ensure that the early years is central to SEND policy change.
- Make inclusion training mandatory in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) alongside safeguarding and first aid.
- Establish guidelines to ringfence HNB for the early years, to make SEND supply and demand mandatory in CSAs, and include transition funding in all areas.
- Task and fund DfE to produce key standardised formats for early years processes.

MPs and Peers

- Raise SEND during early years discussions and debates, and early years during SEND discussions and debates.
- Push to see the SEND section of your local area CSA to understand supply and demand.
- Represent the views of your local parents in the early years in Westminster to raise the profile and awareness of the access crisis across the country.

Local authorities

- Encourage your settings to undertake inclusion training as standard and allow use of SENIF to fund it.
- Review your early years teams to understand if they have the capacity to give settings the support they need to be inclusive, to ensure all needs are met and to transition children effectively.
- Ensure all leadership data includes the early years, and that families are represented on boards and committees.
- Ensure you have an early years specific OAP in your area that is promoted to settings and families.
- Establish transition funding from the early years to Reception stage and ensure children with high needs in the early years are funded through the HNB.
- Promote the DfE Assessment Guidance to your settings, schools and health colleagues and integrate the format with processes such as two year old checks, SENIF applications and transitions to school.

Early years settings

- Request your local OAP from your local authority if you haven't seen one.
 - Request inclusion training from your local authority or stronger practice hub.
 - Check your CSA for the percentage of children in your area expected to have SEND and use this for your business planning.
 - Use the DfE Assessment Guidance to assess and plan support for children.
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Families

- Ask if your setting has inclusion training to support children with SEND.
- Ask to see your local area OAP.
- Report to your local authority if you are turned away from an early years setting.
- Represent early years parents on any boards or committees, so your views and experiences are not overlooked.

Health professionals

- Consider the use of DfE assessment guidance as a core document for two-year-old checks.
- Seek to align early years SEND health data with local authority data.

With the detailed review of the whole SEND system, we have an opportunity to overhaul the way we support children with SEND in the early years to ensure they get the best start.

We believe that implementing our recommendations will lead to an early years sector where every child is supported effectively, alongside a long-term impact of reducing family stress and local authority spend in later stages of the education system. Educators are more likely to stay in the sector with the confidence that they can make a difference and give every child the best start. With standardised systems, strong local authority support and simple funding application processes we can alleviate the pressure on settings and create more places that help children thrive.

Our vision is achievable.

We need to be brave and invest our resources differently, making greater long-term improvements for children, families, educators and the economy.

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Thank you for supporting us in our movement towards an inclusive early years, which ensures that positive change happens, and that all children get the best start in life.

