

**Dingley's Promise  
Policy Early Years  
SEND Recommendations  
& the Schools White Paper  
SEND Reforms**



Dingley's Promise have been lobbying for much needed change to early years education in England, to make it fairer and more inclusive for children with SEND.

The early years has finally been centred in reform proposals for the first time, with the acknowledge that this stage provides a vital opportunity to shape children's long term outcomes.

Key early years mentions and initiatives include:

- Funded Support and SEND: A new 'Inclusive Early Years Fund' is introduced to improve inclusive practice in early years settings.
- A national roll-out of "Best Start Family Hubs," with a SEND professional in every Hub.
- Partnerships and Transitions: Funding provided for partnerships between early years settings and schools to share best practices, particularly for strengthening transitions for children, including those with SEND.
- Investment to create a "more expert early years workforce," by strengthening training for staff to support child development and early learning and the introduction of a new National Professional Qualification.
- National Inclusion Standards and standardised assessment processes.
- An expansion school-based nurseries to increase places available including to children with SEND.
- Fastrack response to support children with highest levels of need.

*"Early years settings will be equipped to provide earlier, higher-quality SEND support for children and their families."*

*"Identifying children's needs early leads to better outcomes."*

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## Our recommendations, and what the White Paper proposes:

### Funding

Our recommendations asked for:	The White Paper proposes:
Create a funding stream in the early years to provide support to children with the highest level of need before they have an EHCP	Tailored support through Individual Support Plans and Targeted and Specialist Support Packages provide an alternative route for children with high needs who don't need an EHCP.
Establishing transition funding in all local areas	Funding for transitions partnerships
Simplified systems which enable quicker and less beurocratic access to funding for settings and families	A full EY funding review in Summer 2026. A new Inclusive early years funding stream will invest in early identification of need

*“£1.6 billion for Inclusive Mainstream Fund over the next 3 years”*

*“Early years providers will receive the new Inclusive Early Years Fund from the 2026 to 2027 financial year and we will go further by consulting later this year on improving how funding flows through the early years system, ensuring support reaches the children who benefit most.”*

*“We are investing over £200 million over three years to ensure every Best Start Family Hub has a dedicated offer for children with additional needs and their families, and a SEND practitioner to offer direct support to children and families. This is on top of the over £700 million already committed to Best Start Family Hubs and the Healthy Babies programme in Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life, in partnership with the Department for Health and Social Care.”*



## Our recommendations, and what the White Paper proposes:

### Systems

Our recommendations asked for:	The White Paper proposes:
More support for families of children with SEND and a stronger team around the child	A dedicated SEND offer in Best Start Family Hubs, with a SEND practitioner providing direct support for parents in every Hub
An Ofsted inspection framework that rewards settings for strong inclusive practice	A change to the Ofsted framework and a commitment to focus on quality of inclusive practice within inspections and local areas inspections
A flexible needs-led rather than diagnosis led approach in early years which response to individual needs in a timely and tailored way	For children and young people with additional needs, beyond that which can be met through the Universal offer of support, there will be three interlocking layers of support: Targeted, Targeted Plus and Specialist. These are flexible layers of support which can be drawn on from day one, when a child needs them
Improvements in Childcare Sufficiency Assessments (CSA's) to ensure effective and accurate data capture and greater accountability	Commitment to strengthen sufficiency and planning for children with SEND including improving data

*“Ofsted and Care Quality Commission (CQC) will check how local services work together for children and young people, and set clear standards and hold them accountable.”*

*“Individual Support Plans will help ensure key information transfers smoothly to a child or young person’s next setting. Partnerships between early years and primary schools will help strengthen transitions, supported by the National Inclusion Standards.”*

*“We will work with local authorities to strengthen their sufficiency planning for children with SEND, including reviewing whether statutory requirements are clear enough and exploring how to improve data on the availability of suitable places, including for those needing specialist support. This will help strengthen local accountability and give parents greater confidence that their children can access the early education and childcare to which they are entitled.”*

## Our recommendations, and what the White Paper proposes:

### Quality

Our recommendations asked for:	The White Paper proposes:
Mandatory inclusion training for the early years sector	£200 million of investment over three years in a new national SEND training programme
Quicker access to early years specialists to support with early intervention strategies and timely assessment.	A 1.8 billion investment in Experts at Hand - giving access to a mix of professionals to support staff and offer effective early interventions
Investment in the early years to ensure that a consistently strong level of inclusion based on Ordinarily Available Provision is an expectation of all settings to benefit all children, not only those with SEND	By 2028 the government will invest £15 million to establish National Inclusion Standards. These will provide a digital library of high-quality identification tools and evidence-based support frameworks

*“We will back our workforce with more than £200 million of investment over three years in a new national SEND training programme. All staff in schools, colleges, and early years settings will benefit from new training by the end of the parliament.”*

*“For early years educators, training will also focus on inclusive pedagogy, child development, and practical strategies for supporting all children, building on the commitments made in the Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life strategy and ensuring every setting feels confident in welcoming children with SEND.”*

*“New National Inclusion Standards and early identification tools will support earlier, more consistent help. Every school will publish a legal Inclusion Strategy, setting out how they will remove barriers to learning to support inclusion. Inclusion will be embedded in Ofsted inspections and national data.”*



# The Schools Whitepaper Early Years SEND Support - Key Considerations

Whilst we broadly welcome the government's commitment to Inclusion, the clear priority on early years SEND as a vital part of the education system and acknowledgement of the immediate need for reform. We do however have key questions on the delivery of aspects of the proposal, outlined here, which require further clarification and consideration, we intend to feed these into the government consultation.

## **Sufficiency - Statutory duty for clear and standardised approaches to recording numbers of children with SEND in each local authority area and use of this data to offer sufficiency of places.**

Currently Childcare Sufficiency Assessments across the country do not accurately consider supply and demand for children with SEND – instead they simply outline the funding available for inclusion and use this as evidence of 'sufficiency'. The Whitepaper needs to demand that local authorities complete thorough assessments of SEND sufficiency in the early years, including both supply and demand for places. Only once this is done reliably will local authorities know if they have enough places for children with SEND in the early years. Ofsted area inspections should also check that this data exists in order to enable assessment of whether the local authority is gathering the relevant information to be able to plan effectively to meet the needs of all children with SEND.

## **Inclusion Bases - Need for investment in inclusion bases outside schools, not solely within school based nurseries.**

The Whitepaper states the government's intention to roll out inclusion bases within school based nurseries. Whilst we welcome the increase of provision, we have heard widespread concerns from local authorities that while there are often more children with SEND in school based nurseries, practice tends to be more diagnosis led than a needs-led and inclusion-focused approach. For schools, this could be a result of the need to secure ongoing funding for the child once they move into reception, often with a focus on enabling 'individual support' and one to one approaches to secure this. More must be done to ensure that new resource bases in early years are focused on a whole setting approach to inclusion and meeting needs, rather than processes which are heavily focused on SEND diagnosis. In recognition of the strong inclusive practice in PVI's, it should also be possible to establish these bases outside of schools.

## **Specialist Early Years Provision - Acknowledgement of specialist early years provision as part of the education system and clear guidelines to ensure quality of service delivery.**

There is no acknowledgment of early years specialist provision as a distinct sector that requires clear guidelines, controls and expectations, in the same way as special schools and Alternative Provision. This must be rectified to ensure quality of service delivery across the early years sector and accountability where requirements are not met. The Whitepaper states that "much of how these settings operate, the cohorts they support, and how provision is arranged, will continue to be determined locally." This risks major differences in both delivery and outcomes of this critical service and it is vital that this is standardised.

## **Experts at Hand (EAH) - Priority for this resource at early years stage, ensuring quick access to professionals to enable swift diagnosis and response to need.**

Whilst we are encouraged to see that this service will be as equally available to the early years sector, as it is to schools, we need to ensure that there is a clear system to monitor usage and ensure schools are not prioritised as has happened historically. Early years settings have an expectation that EAH will give them faster access to health professionals for assessment processes, but it is not clear if this is part of the offer. This needs to be clarified to avoid disappointment and misunderstanding in the sector. Further concerns have been raised about how we can ensure that there are enough health professionals to deliver this service to meet the level of demand there is in the education sector, so there must therefore be a clear long term strategy for recruitment and retention of these roles.

**Fast track for High Needs - The early response to children with complex needs is welcomed but eligibility criteria must be clear and packages of support in EY must be flexible to emerging and changing needs.**

Whilst this in principle is welcomed to ensure that children with the most complex needs are given the highest level of support possible in a timely way, there is no clear structure to determine what level of need this will apply to, and how this will be categorised. Detailed work needs to be done on this both to ensure that eligibility criteria is clear and that the packages of support are suitable for children in the early years when flexibility is vital as needs are still emerging. If Section 23 notifications are to be used as a trigger for the fast track then there must be investment in ensuring this process is working effectively across the country, as currently it is not picking up all the children it should in many areas. More clarity is needed on what the support packages will look like, ensuring that children are not categorised and that truly individualised support can be given to all children who require it.

**Inclusion Guidelines - Clarity is needed over inclusion standards, which need to be tailored to early years but also to link clearly to later stages of education, and utilise existing resources such as the Early Years Assessment Guidance.**

We have heard from many local authorities and settings that standardised documents and formats would be helpful to the sector to support joint working between professionals, reduce duplication for settings and families and to ease transitions. Alignment between stages of education is key for smooth transitions. The Whitepaper states that there will be National Inclusion Standards as well as 'tools, strategies and approaches' created by a panel of experts. It is vital that these new standards take into account materials already created by the Department for Education such as the Early Years Assessment Guidance (2024). Recent research one year after its launch shows the significant positive impact on settings where it has been implemented to support their assessment methods. It is vital that such resources are not wasted or reinvented where clear impacts are being seen.

**SEND professional in Best Start in Life Family Hubs - This role needs to link with and compliment other local area support for families and to focus specifically on the early years.**

It is widely welcomed that there will be a SEND professional to support families in the Family Hubs, however there is still some confusion around what this will look like. Local authorities all have different early years SEND offers, and the new role has to be flexible enough to fit in and compliment other services and professionals. The role is likely to be a named person that families can contact, but there has been disagreement about whether this is accessible to all families, or only those with children who have low and emerging needs. There is also a distinct lack of clarity around whether the role is early years specific or should support families with children of all ages, as well as what kind of qualifications and experience the person who takes the role should have. We would call for this role to be early years specific, to support families of all children including those with high needs and to have experience of working with families of children with SEND.

**Inclusive Mainstream Fund (IMF) - Revision of the IMF to ensure that childminders and smaller settings are not unfairly disadvantaged.**

The IMF is welcomed as a funding stream to ensure core inclusive practice in early years settings. This approach means that small settings and childminders will not be eligible for funding and instead will receive 'packages of support' This is a real concern as many families of children with SEND rely on smaller settings as they are less overwhelming and offer more tailored support for children. This needs urgent reviewed with funding given according to numbers of children with SEND rather than simply size of setting.



