

# Supporting SEND

## Introduction and background

There are around 1.4 million pupils in English schools with an identified special educational need (SEN). Numbers have increased for the fourth consecutive year, from 14.4 per cent of all pupils in 2016 to 15.5 per cent in 2020. Almost 82 per cent of these pupils are in mainstream primary and secondary schools. Although recent reports by Ofsted and others have highlighted some strengths in the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system, there are also significant weaknesses. These include gaps in external provision and training, lack of coordination between services, lack of accountability, and weak co-production.

This qualitative case study explores how the needs of children and young people are met in mainstream schools and how approaches vary between providers. It was carried out before the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic with 21 pupils from 7 mainstream schools in 2 different local authorities. Schools selected the children who participated. Interviews were carried out with the pupils, their parents or carers, and their teachers and support staff. School headteachers and SENCOs (special education needs coordinators) were also interviewed. Group interviews were conducted with representatives from the 2 local authorities and clinical commissioning groups (CCGs). Ofsted recognises that the children in this small scale study are unlikely to be representative of the whole population of pupils with SEND in mainstream schools and that findings are therefore not generalisable. Nevertheless, the report provides useful insights into the experiences of individual pupils.

## Key findings

### Pupil-centered school support

- All the schools that took part in the research described building strong relationships with pupils so that they could understand their unique strengths and needs, tailor support, and provide interventions.
- Understanding of pupils' needs was often bolstered by SEND-focused training and opportunities for continuing professional development for staff.
- When schools focused on building positive relationships to understand a pupil's strengths and what they could achieve, there appeared to be a positive impact on pupil progress.
- A good understanding of individual pupil needs allowed schools to promote social inclusion. Examples were given of structured activities to help pupils to develop positive relationships with peers, and of TAs giving discreet help which did not mark pupils as being different.
- There were other examples of staff not having a full understanding of pupil's strengths and needs. In one case, a parent was aware that the pupil had difficulties forming and maintaining friendships. However, the teacher and class TA felt she got on well with her peers. They had therefore not implemented any strategies to help her with this.
- Several primary schools reported that they had only identified needs once the pupil had reached upper key stage 1 or the start of key stage 2, rather than when the needs initially emerged. Identification issues were more prevalent amongst pupils on school support (i.e., those without an EHC plan).
- Identification issues may arise because the needs are complex. In one case, the TA and form tutor felt that a pupil's main barriers to learning were comprehension, writing and cognition. The SENCO defined her need as a working memory difficulty. In contrast, the headteacher felt her needs were attention-based. In this case, multi-professional involvement would likely have facilitated accurate identification, but it is also important to consider



the importance of school professionals sharing their insights with each other.

- Other barriers to timely identification of need were a lack of specialist SEND knowledge on the part of staff, or pupils masking their need through the use of coping strategies. An example was given of a boy who had learned to lip read, and whose hearing problem was therefore not picked up until Year 6. His positive attitude to learning further masked the problem.
- Having high expectations for pupils with SEND was an important aspect of inclusive practice for members of school staff. Both parents and staff spoke about the importance of aspirations for pupils with SEND, and the need to set targets. As one teacher stated, 'just because he's been diagnosed with ASD.... it doesn't hold us back'.

### The role of teaching assistants (TAs)

- Almost all pupils who took part in the research had TAs allocated to them. Sometimes, this was to support them in the classroom, but they were often taken out for intervention activities. This raises concerns about pupils with SEND having full access to the high-quality teaching that they need in order to have a chance of success.
- Time out of class for intervention activity meant that some pupils were missing entire chunks of the curriculum. Not only does this imply that regular learning loss will occur, but also that the curriculum that they are offered does not have the same ambition as for their peers.
- The significant amounts of curriculum time that pupils with SEND are spending with TAs also raises the issue of support staff training, specifically in the subject and curriculum knowledge required to teach pupils who have struggled to learn the intended curriculum at the same rate as their peers. To deliver intervention activities successfully, TAs need good subject knowledge. Robust subject knowledge training is therefore an important part of ensuring that the TA role works effectively for children and young people with SEND.
- In a small number of cases, pupils had become over-reliant on their TAs, preventing the development of independence. Some parents and carers raised concerns around social exclusion due to the amount of time spent out of class. However, most parents and carers were very positive about the reassurance and facilitation of learning provided by TAs.

### The curriculum

- Some parents and school staff thought that pupils were being taught curriculum content that they could not easily access. Due to missed prior learning or unmet needs, these pupils did not have some of the required foundational knowledge and skills. In addition, they were not always given the chance to master the basics before moving forwards. As one carer put it, 'sometimes you have to go backwards before you can go forwards'.
- This highlights the importance of practitioners, including TAs, class teachers, and SENCOs, having strong subject knowledge so they can understand how best to develop and teach the curriculum to support pupils with SEND.

- It also shows that curriculum content needs to be prioritised effectively so that pupils with SEND can master what they most need to know before moving on – this was not always the case.

### Home-school relationships

- Some schools developed positive and trusting relationships with parents and carers, treating them as partners in co-production. Parents shared information about their children with schools, which helped with the identification of needs. Schools used a range of formal and informal communication channels to encourage families to share information. Formal channels included transition meetings, EHC plan reviews, and parents evenings. Informal channels included end-of-day catch-ups, home-school communication books, and families calling schools to discuss concerns.
- Some parents and carers felt, however, that they were not given sufficient information about their child's learning and development. Some were not given opportunities to input into support plans. In some cases, pupils did not have a written support plan. This meant that the graduated approach was not in place and, crucially, that parents and carers were not given the opportunity to co-produce support plans.
- A few parents and carers did not consistently take up opportunities for engagement. There were examples of home-school communication books in which parents had not written anything, or of parents and carers not engaging with homework which had been set.

### The role of SENCOs and multi-agency working

- SENCOs fulfilled a crucial intermediary role between external agencies, schools, and families. However, some SENCOs were doing this alongside a full-time class teacher role, indicating that the role of the SENCO was not always strongly prioritised. Some SENCOs felt that they did not have enough time to carry out their responsibilities and access continuing professional development. Others reported frustration with delays and bureaucracy with both referrals and EHC plan assessments which prevented them from performing their role.
- Leaders from both local authorities had strategies to promote collaboration between education, health, and care services. However, this did not always happen in practice and many school and family experiences highlighted challenges such as long waiting times and high levels of bureaucracy with the EHC plan process.
- Some families and schools felt that pupils did not have access to the full range of practitioners needed, and some did not always have timely access. Occasionally, families felt the need to commission or pay for services themselves to remedy the lack of timely provision from external services.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-send/supporting-send#pupil-centred-school-support>