



**James Naish MP**

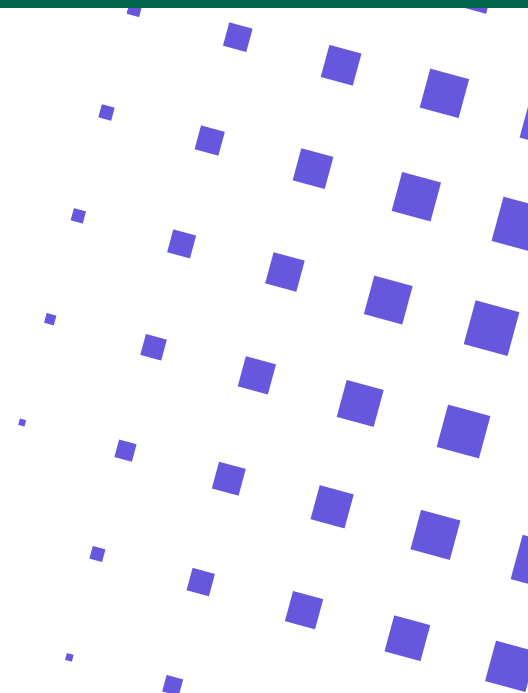
Building a **thriving** Rushcliffe for **everyone**

# Restoring confidence in the SEND system:



INPUTS FROM  
RUSHCLIFFE FOR  
THE UPCOMING  
*SCHOOLS WHITE  
PAPER*

## Roundtable report



# Contact details

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*Picture of one of the roundtable meetings  
with constituents from Rushcliffe*

# Foreword

There isn't a single week that goes by without a family getting in touch with me about special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). While some stories are positive, the vast majority are harrowing and demonstrate how the current system is failing almost everybody involved – teachers, support staff, parents, carers and, of course, children with complex mental and physical needs who, like everyone, deserve the very best start in life. This is sadly not their experience, and it is incumbent on the government to propose practical solutions and improvements as soon as possible.

This report is the result of three roundtable discussions that took place in Rushcliffe in September 2025. Over 135 people expressed an interest in attending the discussions, with dozens of them completing surveys and sharing their stories in advance. The final discussions were attended by over 60 educators, parents and carers who openly shared their lived experiences of the broken SEND system. I am grateful to everyone who took the time to contribute to these meetings, and for the openness with which my constituents spoke about the strengths and weaknesses of the local and national picture.

In surgery appointments as well as at the three roundtable discussions, I've been struck by the determination on display – by parents and carers fighting tirelessly for their children, and by teachers and support staff seeking to go above and beyond to provide stability and care to vulnerable children. Alongside this determination, I've heard deep frustrations about SEND support being largely reactive and only provided once children have *already* reached crisis point. I was repeatedly told that SEND processes are opaque, and that trust between families, schools, local authorities and the government has eroded over time as a result.

The government's forthcoming *Schools White Paper*, therefore, comes at a critical juncture. If we are to restore confidence in the SEND system and rebuild broken relationships, reforms must be grounded in earlier identification; in fair and timely access to holistic support; in clearly defining and delivering inclusive practices while broadening alternative provision; and in developing a funding and accountability framework that ultimately empowers schools and parents. The voices recorded in this report are clear: families shouldn't have to fight individual battles every step of the way, and educators shouldn't be left to pick-up the pieces, trying to meet ever-more complex needs without appropriate support that reflects the changing demands of the classroom.

I know that this report isn't perfect, and that it won't adequately reflect all the experiences that I've been told about – but I hope that everyone recognises the positive intent behind it. I also hope that it contributes constructively to the debate at the national level and serves as a reminder that behind every statistic and every story, there is a child with talents and aspirations, and families who simply want them to be given the best chance possible.

**James Naish MP**, Member of Parliament for Rushcliffe

## Summary of recommendations

**1** Embed early support and pre-diagnostic pathways through mandated screening for SEND indicators, creating cross-agency hubs and more equitable access for marginal groups.

**2** Streamline assessment and EHCP processes by creating a light-touch EHCP, strengthening co-production and enabling regular reviews during key transition periods.

**3** Strengthen inclusion capacity in mainstream schools by introducing nationwide training, embedding specialist roles and providing alternative pathways from at least Key Stage 3.

**4** Reform funding, accountability and rebuild trust by addressing funding inequalities, putting inclusion at the heart of school assessments and putting SEND at the heart of the NHS.

**5** Co-creation and phased implementation of reforms by piloting in areas with strong local buy-in and building in review points, independent auditing and flexibility

## Report statistics

9.2/10

Average **educator** score for the complexity of the current SEND referral process

54%

of **parents/carers** said it takes 'two years or more' to complete the SEND assessment process

100%

of **educators** said that they expect SEND in their school to increase over the next five years

62%

of **parents/carers** felt the Department of Education understands SEND "not well" or "badly"

2.3/10

Average **educator** score for the effectiveness of the current SEND system

2.8/10

Average **parent/carer** score for the effectiveness of the current SEND system

3.0/10

Average **educator** score for optimism about SEND systems improving over the next five years

2.3/10

Average **parent/carer** score for optimism about SEND systems improving over the next five years

## Context

As I write this report in early October 2025, the government is in the process of finalising a new *Schools White Paper*. First announced as part of the Spending Review in June 2025, this paper will set the direction for reforms across the educational system, including how children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are assessed, supported and included.

The data is clear that special educational needs are growing. According to government data, in 2024/25, over 1.7 million pupils in England – 19.6% of all pupils – have SEND, an increase of 93,700 (5.6%) pupils since 2023/24. The percentage of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) has increased to 5.3%, from 4.8% in 2024; and the percentage of pupils receiving special educational needs support without an EHCP has increased to 14.2%, from 13.6% in 2023/24.

This has put unparalleled strain on the system. This was recognised by the House of Commons' Public Accounts Committee in January 2025 which published a report which, at the very outset, said that “the system to support children and young people with special educational needs in England is reaching, or, arguably, has already reached, crisis point.” This was “despite a 58% increase in the Department for Education’s high needs funding over the last decade.” The Committee said it was clear that “outcomes for children have not improved which inevitably undermines parents’ confidence in the system.” This also reflects the conclusions in the Labour Party’s 2024 general election manifesto which said, “Too often our education and care systems do not meet the needs of all

children, including those with SEND.”

This report cannot replicate the forensic work of the Public Accounts Committee, or the House of Commons’ Education Select Committee which published its own report – *Solving the SEND Crisis* – on the day of my first roundtable in Rushcliffe (18th September 2025). However, the details of the upcoming White Paper are not yet in the public domain and stakeholder groups – including parents, schools and local authorities – are, therefore, awaiting clarity on how legal entitlements, inclusion, accountability and funding mechanisms will be reshaped.

In this context, this report takes an alternative bottom-up approach, focusing on the experiences and opinions of educators, parents and carers from my constituency. Their opinions are particularly insightful and relevant given Nottinghamshire County Council has been at the sharp end of the SEND crisis since May 2023 when Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission found “widespread failings” following an inspection in January-February of the same year.

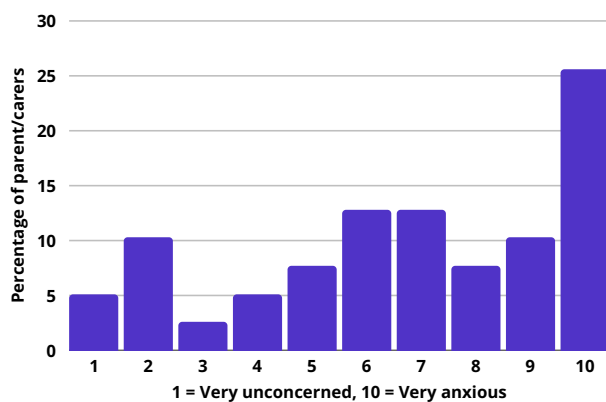


***These children deserve better – they deserve an education that heals, not harms. Right now, Nottinghamshire’s system is failing them***  
A Rushcliffe educator

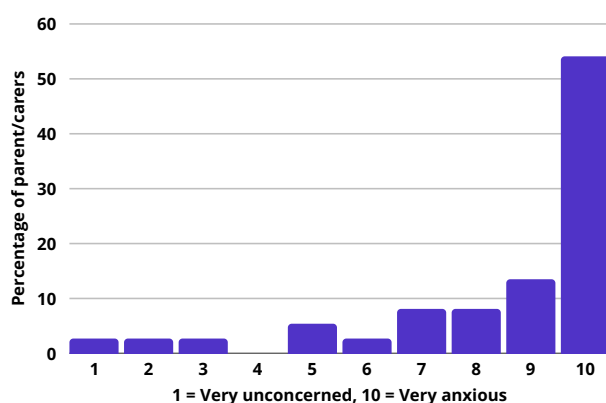


Two areas for priority action were identified: (1) to urgently identify, assess and provide for the needs of children and young people with SEND; and (2) to identify and address the delays and gaps in access to some

**On a scale of 1–10, before starting to seek SEND support for your first SEND child, how did you feel about the process?**



**After going through the process once, how would you feel applying again?**



health services. A subsequent inspection report from July 2025 shows that progress has been made in both areas, but further improvements are needed across the board to ensure that the service is robust and can meet the growth in SEND evidenced above.

This report is structured in the same way as the roundtable discussions, with four key areas of focus: early identification and family support; access to assessments and EHCPs; inclusion and workforce capacity in schools; and questions about future funding, accountability and trust. In each section, I highlight key themes from the discussions before making recommendations. Irrespective of whether these recommendations are accepted or not, the current system is creaking and reform is essential – but it must be handled with

sensitivity and clarity. If it isn't, there is a very high risk of compounding existing mistrust and inequity.

## Section 1: Early identification and family support

The roundtable discussions started by focusing on a child's early years.

### Accelerating SEND recognition

One of the strongest recurring messages from the roundtables was that both formal and informal SEND recognition comes too late. Several parents and carers spoke with frustration about how the system only intervenes once problems have already escalated. As one parent put it, "Too often, the system only reacts once things break." This frustration was shared by educators, with one noting that by the time most schools became formally involved in providing structured intervention, children may "already be three or four years behind." A parent described early years settings as focusing on "monitoring, not intervening" while a teacher asked, "Why are we not having these conversations earlier?" This sense of catching up with entrenched problems, rather than working to prevent them in the first place, was repeated by dozens of roundtable participants, with the catch-up after the Covid-19 pandemic deemed to be particularly challenging due

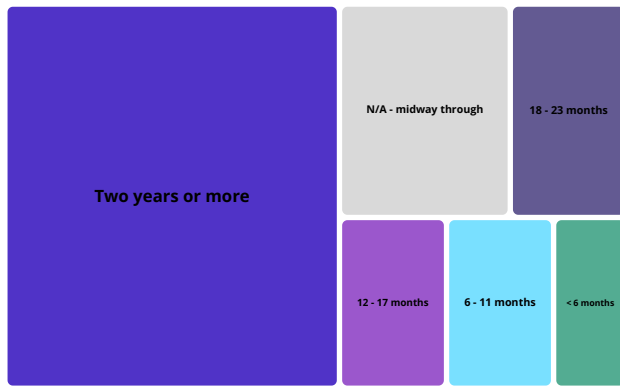


***There needs to be more specialist provision, so that families don't have to wait so long to get their young children assessed and early intervention is genuinely possible***

A Rushcliffe educator



### How long did it take you to complete the process of seeking SEND support for your child?



to the unexpected pause in routine approaches to diagnosis.

The consensus was, therefore, that a much more proactive model is needed – one that identifies risks and additional needs much earlier in a child’s SEND journey, ideally in their preschool or early primary years. This is especially important given, according to research, the brain has reached 88% of its adult weight by the age of five.\* Several educators noted that speech, language and communication needs often go unaddressed until they are more severe, and that early behaviour or social communication issues can be missed in busy nursery or classroom settings. The result is that children lose precious developmental time and schools are subsequently required to accelerate progress at a later life stage. Educators suggested that genuine early intervention could change long-term trajectories and reduce the higher costs of remedial or specialist support later in a SEND child’s education. There was strong support among roundtable attendees for smaller classroom sizes, as well as a desire to see wider and earlier access to specialist Allied Healthcare Professionals (AHPs)\*\*.

However, participants were also clear that nursery and pre-school settings shouldn’t

be blamed for failing to address SEND, given they are currently neither equipped nor expected to do so. Several educators noted that nurseries have “no incentive” to look into potential SEND; have no time, funding or expectation to attend SEND training; and are often, themselves, “struggling to survive.” It is lamentable that the process of producing an EHCP often takes longer than some children spend at nursery or pre-school in total.

If an early intervention strategy is to work, nurseries and pre-school settings must be properly equipped, funded and trained to play this vital role – and should be empowered to make interventions on their own terms, rather than always waiting for a formal diagnosis. It was noted, however, that this can be tricky when pre-school learning tends to be play-centric, meaning a lot of the smaller signs of SEND detected at home can be easily missed in an early years education setting. This emphasises the importance of specialist training and trusting parental intuition.



***Individual staff members have very different personal experience and training to equip them, especially in early years settings, so provision and confidence is variable***

A Rushcliffe educator

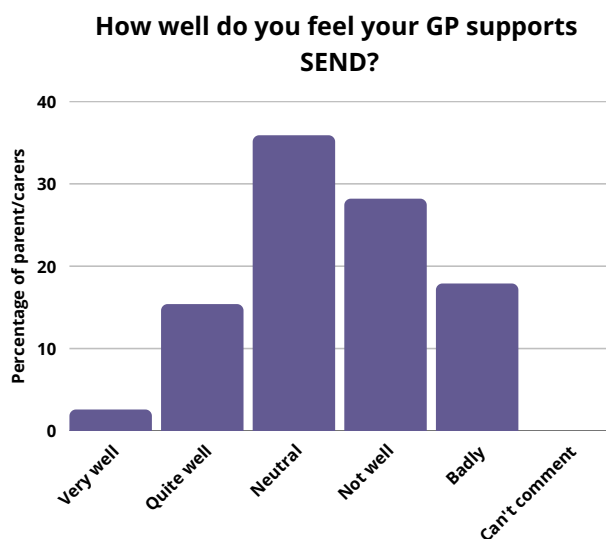


### Co-locating early years support

Closely related to the theme of early identification was the need for greater multi-agency collaboration. Educators described a system in which schools are often the first to spot concerns but the responsibility for formal diagnosis sits elsewhere. These services have often been cut back or

\* Dekaban, A. S., & Sadowsky, D. (1978, October). *Annals of Neurology*, 4(4), 345–356.

\*\* More information about AHPs can be accessed at <https://www.england.nhs.uk/ahp/role/>.



changed, meaning large backlogs and lengthy waits are now the norm. One carer summed it up succinctly, saying “Even if a nursery or school spots the issue quickly, the NHS ultimately ends-up determining how long a child has to wait for therapy.” It was noted that the relationship between families and their GP has been considerably weakened due to the Covid-19 pandemic and a general increase in over-the-phone or online medical work. As one educator said, “ongoing [medical] engagement and follow-up isn’t there.” A carer also commented, “You can find yourself in a perpetual loop of not getting anywhere because you rarely see the same people.”

For many roundtable participants, the co-location of education and health services, ideally near school settings, is key – something that has historically worked well, with *Sure Start* being mentioned positively by at least a dozen participants for its intensive early years support. Early years settings that host paediatric drop-ins or speech therapy clinics can flag concerns much earlier, but these types of services are now patchy at best. The prevailing perception was that because health bodies have limited formal accountability in the SEND process, delays and/or capacity gaps

ultimately push pressure back onto educators. As one educator said, “The ‘h’ in EHCP is largely absent”, with confidence of educators lowered as a result. Schools are often left carrying the weight of unmet need, without full knowledge or resources to make an immediate difference. One educator noted that the trade union Unison has taken the unusual step of advising its educator members *not* to carry out any health-related tasks – but practically, there is no one else available to fill the gap. It was also argued that the role of health visitors should be radically overhauled with new job descriptions, training and clearer pathways for earlier SEND referrals.

**“Getting specialist advice from healthcare professionals and services can be incredibly challenging. Face-to-face meetings with healthcare professionals are becoming increasingly infrequent**  
A Rushcliffe educator

### Help with navigating the complex SEND system

Parents and carers at the roundtables also emphasised the importance of empowerment and better navigational support. Many said they were overwhelmed by the sheer complexity of the system which involves various acronyms, job titles and referral pathways, and often results in being passed from one professional to another, as noted above. For families and smaller schools, the challenge is not just about accessing services but understanding what help to ask for in the first place. At least one parent said that they felt “gas lit” for being repeatedly sent on non-violent resistance (NVR) training courses for her SEND children, with their complex needs

seemingly reduced to poor parenting. She was required to attend several of these courses before being eligible to progress towards an EHCP for her youngest child, despite attending very similar courses for her three older children. Another parent said, “you constantly feel like a criminal, that you’ve got to prove yourself.”

There was, therefore, a strong plea for local authorities to provide clearer, more human forms of support – for example, dedicated parent support officers who could act as trusted guides; better engagement and collaboration with parent carer forums; regular community-based workshops that explain the system in plain language; and drop-in clinics where early questions can be raised.

Several parents also advocated for peer-to-peer mentoring where more experienced SEND families could share their knowledge and help others avoid common pitfalls; and it was suggested that a flowchart showing the end-to-end SEND system, alongside a clear directory of contacts, would help people navigate the process more effectively. Early support should not simply be about clinical or professional improvements but relational ones too:

SEND families need to be given confidence, reassurance and to feel listened to, just as much as they need a referral letter.



**Many parents lack understanding of the system, leading to repeated refusals, creating further barriers and frustration in accessing the help their children urgently need**

A Rushcliffe educator



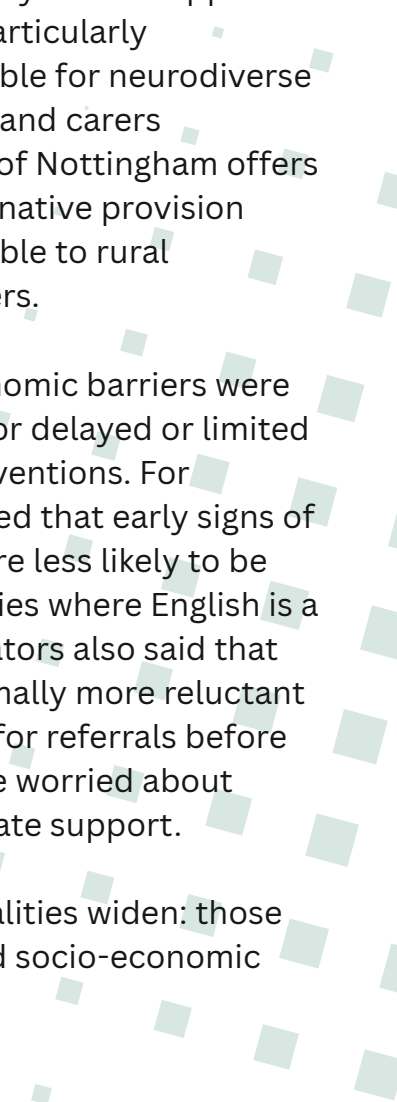
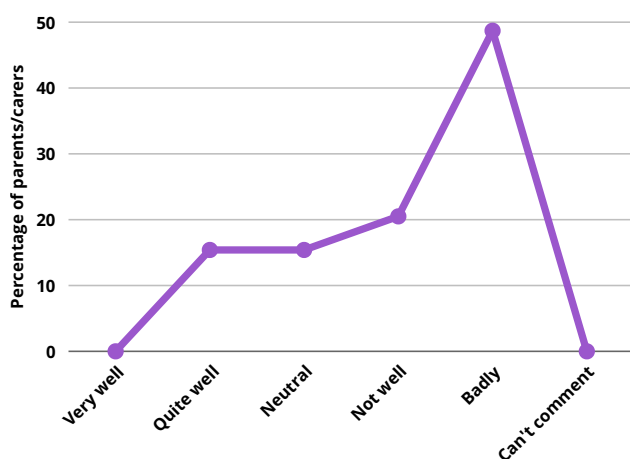
Recognising socio-economic and cultural barriers to SEND access

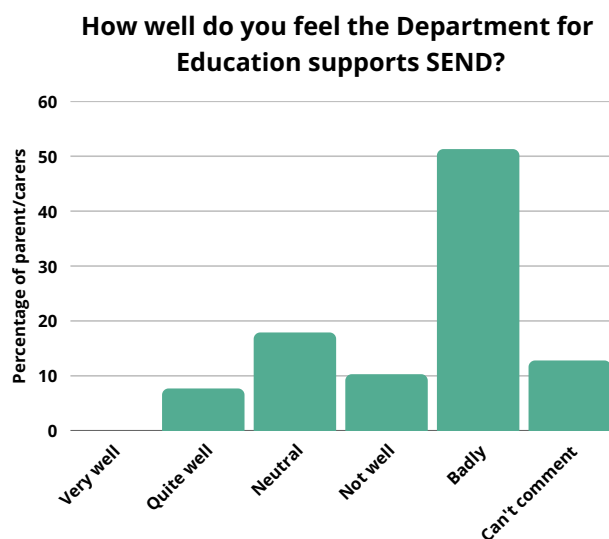
This section of the discussion also highlighted concerns about equity of access, particularly in rural areas of Rushcliffe and neighbouring districts. Families in villages often have fewer nursery options, require longer travel times to see specialists and can be less aware of voluntary sector support. Long journeys can be particularly challenging and unsuitable for neurodiverse children. Some parents and carers suggested that the city of Nottingham offers a broader range of alternative provision options than that available to rural Nottinghamshire dwellers.

Cultural and socio-economic barriers were also raised as reasons for delayed or limited access to positive interventions. For example, it was suggested that early signs of developmental needs are less likely to be addressed in communities where English is a second language. Educators also said that poorer parents are normally more reluctant to seek help or to push for referrals before school because they are worried about losing other forms of state support.

The result is that inequalities widen: those with the confidence and socio-economic

**How well do you feel Nottinghamshire County Council supports SEND?**





capital to push the system are more likely to secure early intervention, while others wait in silence until problems become unavoidable and “the wheels fall off.” This is especially evident in Rushcliffe where timely access to private specialist healthcare and strong parental advocacy can enable children who meet the criteria to secure EHCPs earlier – sometimes months or years ahead of others with equally significant needs but fewer resources to navigate the system.

It was also suggested by parents, carers and educators that girls are more likely to mask SEND than boys. One parent recalled their daughter being described “as good as gold” by educators throughout her early years, with issues surfacing much later. Another used the phrase, “Because she’s well-behaved, the teachers don’t help her” and a third said, “If your child isn’t throwing things, they will be ignored.” Masking is especially problematic given the points referenced above about the need for early intervention, which is why mandatory clinical screening in early years could be beneficial.

Taken together, these insights painted a picture of early support that is fragmented,

uneven and too slow. The message from educators and parents alike was clear: recognition and intervention before a crisis should be a top priority. This means embedding early identification in preschool and early primary years; ensuring health and education agencies work in tandem rather than in parallel; empowering parents with clear and trusted guidance; and addressing the additional barriers faced by rural or marginalised families.

Without this shift, children will continue to be caught at the point of breakdown, rather than being supported to thrive from the very beginning.

**“ Early support for families is something most families don’t have. Instead, children come to school having rarely seen a professional and are years behind in getting support – despite the first years being so important in development ”**  
A Rushcliffe educator

To avoid duplication, recommendations based on each section of this report have only been included once – at the end of this document (pages 25-26). There are up to nine recommendations per section.

## Section 2: Access to assessments and EHCPs

### Delays, backlogs and unpredictability

Perhaps the most consistent theme raised across all three roundtables was the length of time children and families are forced to wait for assessments and EHCPs. It is well-known that too few EHCPs nationally are issued within the statutory 20-week deadline. Parents in Rushcliffe spoke of

delays lasting not just months but years. One described being “32 months into the process.” She said, “I was told by a professional that my child would hopefully be seen by the time he reached secondary school. He is 6.” Other parents and carers said they were sometimes dismissed as “overly anxious or paranoid parents.” Several described how their children were described as “too young” to assess and they should “wait until school.”

These types of comments from professionals, including educators, have created the sense of “gatekeepers” operating within the system to limit the number of EHCPs being produced. I suspect that this is rarely done on purpose but, instead, reflects a lack of understanding and trust in the system, including from those who should be advocating for it.

EHCP delays are not just inconvenient; they are life-shaping. Parents and carers often described being in “limbo”, with children officially in the system but months or years away from receiving meaningful support. Educators noted that many pupils spend their early years in school without specialist input, meaning that by the time an EHCP is agreed, valuable time has been lost. One

headteacher noted that “the EHCP often lands just as a child is moving onto the next key stage – too late for us to make a real difference.” Another sympathised with parents and carers, noting that “it’s almost a full-time job to get the help you need.”



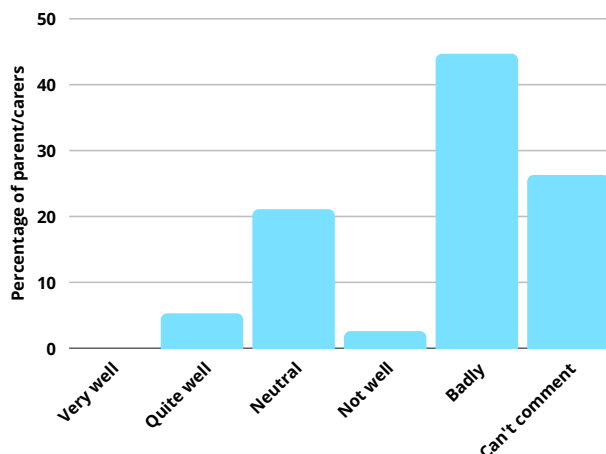
***The impact is devastating: children without EHCPs are cut from my provision despite clear needs, leaving families unsupported***

An alternative provider



The inconsistency of waiting times was also notable. Some families reported relatively swift decisions, especially those who had moved into Rushcliffe from further afield, while others had waited years and/or were forced to attend a tribunal. This unpredictability makes planning impossible for parents and schools alike, and undermines trust in the fairness and effectiveness of the current system. Several family members said that they had changed jobs or stopped work altogether and started homeschooling as a result of their child’s SEND, showing the wider economic impact of inaction. Several roundtable participants openly acknowledged that the process of seeking support for their SEND child had damaged their own mental health and said they were, in turn, receiving medical input.

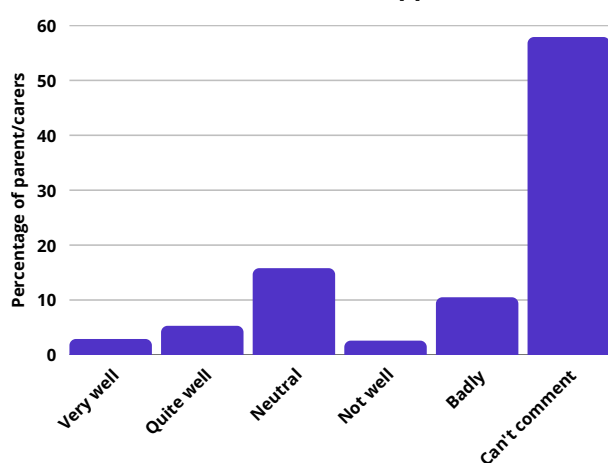
**How well do you feel Nottinghamshire Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) supports SEND?**



*Unclear, misunderstood and inconsistent criteria*

Linked to the above, there was a general perception that the threshold for being entitled to an EHCP is unclear, misunderstood and inconsistently applied. Parents described being told by schools that their child was “not bad enough” to qualify

**How well do you feel Nottinghamshire Parent Carer Forum supports SEND?**



or that their difficulties would be considered “borderline.” Many roundtable participants said this sense of “greyness” potentially resulted in children with real needs falling between the cracks with parents, carers and schools giving up before they’ve even started the process. One educator said, “We may see the need, but they [local authorities] ultimately determine the severity.”

This has created a two-tier system. Those who secure an EHCP, however delayed, eventually access more stable support on the whole, while those without one are dependent on the uneven goodwill of schools, stretched teaching assistants and/or short-term interventions that can be quickly withdrawn as other children with formally recognised SEND are prioritised. As described in the previous chapter, participants noted that the ability to pay privately – whether for assessments, speech and language therapy reports or legal advice – can tip the balance in one child’s favour over another. One parent said that they had spent around £10,000 seeking support for their child. Another parent recalled being told by a GP friend which “key words” to use in their EHC needs assessment. Another reported, “We had to get a solicitor involved

before they took us seriously.” A fourth said, “every sentence is designed to stop you.” In short, families without spare resources are almost always at the back of the line when it comes to securing an EHCP – but many parents said they feel like they are letting their child down if they’re unable to secure one, evidence that fighting for an EHCP has become normalised.

Participants also highlighted geographical inequities, with thresholds and needs being interpreted differently by neighbouring local authorities. Families living on the border of Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, for example, found themselves caught between inconsistent practices across the two counties. As one parent put it, “It genuinely feels like a postcode lottery.”

**“ Parents, already exhausted and desperate, are forced to pay costly advocacy services just to secure an assessment for an EHCP. Those who cannot afford this are left without one. The system, instead of supporting families, has become a barrier ”**  
A Rushcliffe educator

Consultation, co-production and transparency

When EHC assessments proceed, many roundtable participants said the consultation process feels tokenistic. Educators described sending video clips to educational psychologists who make an assessment based on this evidence. Roundtable participants were clear that Microsoft Teams or Facetime observations cannot sufficiently capture the essence of a child’s needs, and noted that imperfect Covid-necessary measures such as assessing speech and language therapy remotely had continued. It was also noted that paragraphs

in EHCPs are sometimes the same for children with vastly different needs, suggesting the use of ‘boilerplate’ content. One educator said that EHCPs “give you direction” but are often “very basic” and increasingly lack a personal touch.

One educator said that her academy trust had taken the step of employing an educational psychologist to meet SEND pupils’ needs in a timelier fashion, but the local authority wouldn’t consistently accept the information provided. She said, “It doesn’t feel like a joint endeavour but that we are fighting each other.” Indeed, almost all roundtable participants said that genuine co-production of EHCPs was rare. They said that schools and families need clearer guidance, accessible templates and step-by-step information about how a high-quality, enforceable EHCP can be produced.

Upon completion, several parents described being presented with draft EHCPs and being asked to sign them, with little opportunity for meaningful dialogue or changes. Roundtable participants stressed that their expertise as parents/carers of SEND children should be respected and integrated at this early stage, rather than sidelined or devalued. Educators also noted that schools

aren’t appropriately engaged about the cost of meeting the content of an EHCP as it is being finalised.

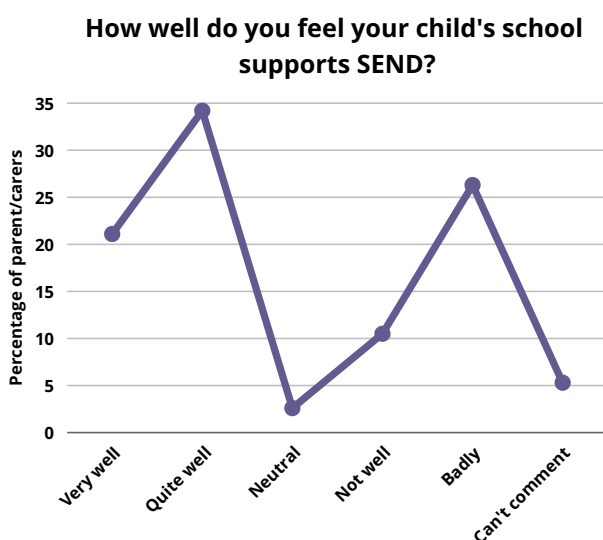
Several participants also noted that the language of EHCPs can appear purposefully vague – phrases like “may benefit from” or “should consider” create loopholes and leave schools without enforceable duties. For many, this was perceived to be down to trying to manage local authorities’ funding challenges, rather than presenting genuine choices or options to the SEND child’s school.

**“ EHCPs are not written well enough to protect the rights of young people with SEND. They are either too broad meaning schools can get away with providing ineffective support, or they leave schools with no practical way to meet the need ”**  
A parent/carer

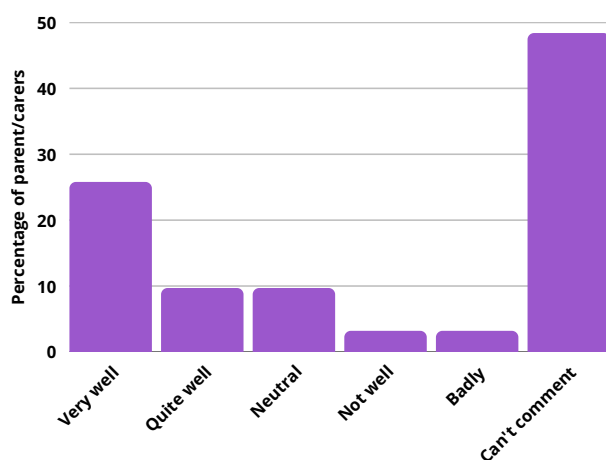
Reviewing and updating EHCPs

A further frustration raised by both parents/carers and educators was the review and amendment of EHCPs once in place. Children’s needs change, sometimes rapidly, yet many families reported that their EHCPs remained static for years. One teacher remarked about a male pupil, “We know what he needs now, but the EHCP is old – it’s not caught up.” Another educator said that the day-to-day challenge of meeting a SEND child’s needs can look and feel very different to what was envisaged when the EHCP was produced. Parents said annual reviews often feel like a tick-box exercise, with the same questions repeated but little real analysis about whether the provision is working or not.

It’s worth reiterating here how high the



**How well do you feel your child's alternative provider supports SEND?**



stakes are. Outdated or inadequate plans leave children with the wrong support and families with no effective mechanism to request adjustments. Several participants called for more frequent interim reviews during times of rapid change such as puberty, when transitioning between schools or when a child's mental health declines. Others suggested that some form of independent oversight could ensure reviews remain rigorous and responsive.

#### Risk of EHCP removal or restriction post-reform

Finally, there was deep anxiety about the future of EHCPs in the context of ongoing national reform. Some parents had heard suggestions that eligibility might be tightened, that appeals could be transferred to schools or local ombudsmen, or that tribunals might be curtailed. One parent said, "When they talk about getting rid of EHCPs, we worry we lose our protection."

For many families, the EHCP is the only enforceable safeguard in an otherwise inconsistent system. Despite the delays and flaws, it remains their child's "passport" to support. The prospect of weakening or removing these protections generated

considerable fear. As another parent observed, "If you take away the EHCP, you take away our only official voice."

Educators also saw value in having EHCPs, but simultaneously advocated for a world in which more earlier intervention would, in turn, reduce the need for so many EHCPs. The burden to schools of meeting the growing number of EHCPs was described as considerable. Educators were also worried that badly implemented reform could shift more responsibility onto already-stretched schools, without offering new funding and/or enabling easier access to professional expertise. They warned that without statutory recognition, SEND support risks becoming discretionary (i.e. subject to budget cycles or headteacher priorities).

**“The Department for Education could fund independent advocates or key workers to support families through the EHCP journey. This would level the playing field, ensuring those without financial means to pay privately are not left behind”**  
A Rushcliffe educator

Participants, therefore, generally urged the authors of the *Schools White Paper* not to dilute the legal protections linked to EHCPs. On the contrary, they said EHCPs should be reformed to make them easier to produce and implement, as well as more personalised. They also advocated for more holistic support services, so the emphasis on getting an EHCP in the first place is steadily reduced. Several participants proposed a light-touch EHCP for the early years or to quickly put a small amount of initial funding in place to enable SEND children with higher needs to be supported as their EHC needs assessment is being completed. The SENIF (SEND Inclusion

Funding) approach in Leicestershire was applauded for its flexibility.

**Section 3: Inclusion and workforce capacity in mainstream schools**

The ambition of ‘inclusion’ vs the operational reality

In section three of the roundtables, we started by talking about ‘inclusion’. Almost all participants said that inclusion shouldn’t be an abstract policy aspiration but was a moral duty of society. Parents, carers and educators all emphasised the importance of children with SEND being able to attend their local schools and remain embedded in their communities as much as possible, while noting that special schools will always be required for some higher-needs children.

Yet behind this well-intentioned principle, an uncomfortable reality was often described: that schools are being asked to deliver ‘inclusion’ without the resources or specialist staff required to make it meaningful. One headteacher said, “We want to include SEND children – but we don’t have access to speech therapists, behaviour mentors or sufficient sensory spaces to make this happen.” This mismatch between

ambition and capacity leaves schools stretched, teachers frustrated and children under-supported. Families were equally candid with one parent saying, “Being physically in a classroom but left unsupported is categorically *not* inclusion.” Another said, “Schools are now businesses with no incentive to support neurodiversity.”



**Schools always seem to be trying their best to support SEND children but the facilities and funding are not sufficient for them to provide the care they would like to**

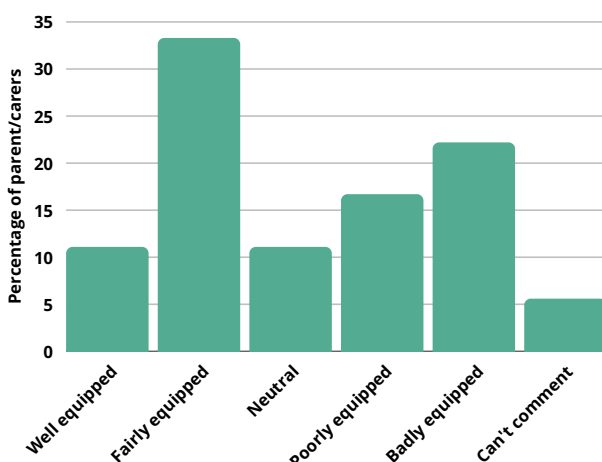
An alternative provider



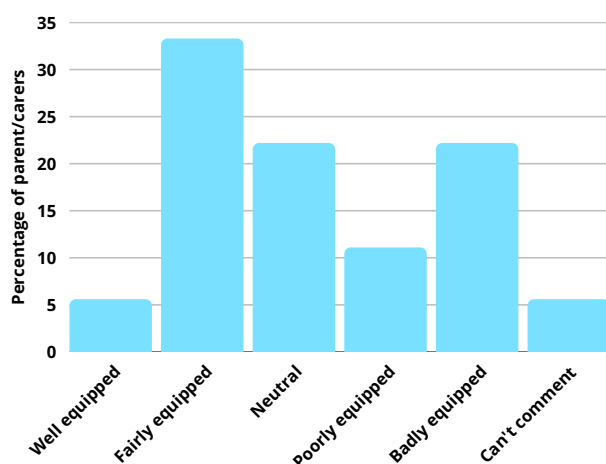
For most roundtable participants, the issue was not whether inclusion should happen but how it should be done more effectively. Families said that without adequate support, inclusion can easily slip into tokenism with children being present *in name only*. Several educators described how specialist classrooms can become “a holding space” for behaviour management, rather than spaces to encourage and maximise SEND participation – particularly in primary schools which often lack specialist support staff. Rather than benefiting from inclusive settings, SEND children allocated to these dedicated spaces risk becoming isolated and excluded from the broader experiences that are meant to help them thrive.

Several roundtable participants suggested that SEND was now so prominent in the classroom – with more than one in two children exhibiting SEND in some cases – that radical reform of the education system is needed, and this should start by assuming that *everyone has SEND*. They believed that the curriculum, school buildings and other

**How would you describe the readiness of your child's teachers to support SEND?**



**How would you describe the facilities at your child's school to support SEND?**



spaces would only be thought about in a radically different and truly inclusive way if the Department for Education's starting assumption shifted. The use of the Outdoor Play And Learning (OPAL) programme at one of the East Leake primary schools was championed as a way of reimagining traditional approaches to school play times.

### Training, specialist roles and in-school expertise

A key barrier to inclusive education identified by roundtable participants was the lack of knowledge and confidence among mainstream staff when working with children with SEND. Some teachers and teaching assistants noted that their initial training had offered little specialist guidance on autism, Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, sensory processing needs or neurodiversity more broadly. One Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENDCO) noted, "We've had two inset days on autism in five years." One teaching assistant acknowledged that at times, she "just kind of makes things up."

Families echoed this concern, pointing out that teachers often turned to them for advice rather than providing guidance

themselves. As one parent remarked, "A lack of insight means teachers are sometimes asking us for advice when it should ideally be the other way round."

Roundtable discussions pointed towards a clear solution: the establishment of a national training programme for SEND, embedded within initial teacher training and renewed throughout their careers. Participants wanted to see SEND knowledge treated not as an optional add-on but as a core professional practice. It was noted that this shift is starting to happen, with at least a couple of educators noting that recent graduates (post the mid-2010s) are better prepared for SEND in the classroom than they were 20-30 years ago – but the shift needs to be accelerated.



***I have been a SENDCO for four years and as much as I love it, it is so demoralising. I work far more hours than I am paid for and still feel like I am failing children and families***

A Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator



Roundtable participants also argued for more protected time for SENDCOs and others supporting SEND teaching, and for the creation of tiered specialist roles – for example, dyslexia leads, behaviour coordinators, autism specialists etc. – so that every school has access to in-house expertise. This would, of course, need appropriate funding.

Several parents/carers suggested that such roles would improve relationships. Teachers who understood neurodiversity, they argued, would be less likely to dismiss children as 'naughty' or 'quirky' and more likely to intervene constructively. Training,

expertise and the time to apply knowledge were consistently seen as the foundation stones for a more effective ‘inclusive’ mainstream system.

Reasonable adjustments, flexibility and curriculum design

Parents described inclusion not only as a question of where children learn but *how* they learn. They highlighted examples of children being punished for behaviours that were in fact coping mechanisms. One parent said, “He’s told off for rocking but that’s how he regulates.” Another described their child being denied a chew toy because it was seen as a distraction for other children, despite it being a vital sensory aid for the child.

Educators agreed that greater flexibility is needed around curriculum design, assessment and school routines. Large year groups and class sizes, rigid timetables and punitive behaviour policies were seen as barriers to inclusion that could result in a “sensory overload.” As one educator reflected, “Schools should be making reasonable adjustments, not tightening up their behavioural expectations.” It was noted that practically, measures such as dimmed lighting, adjusted acoustics, flexible seating,

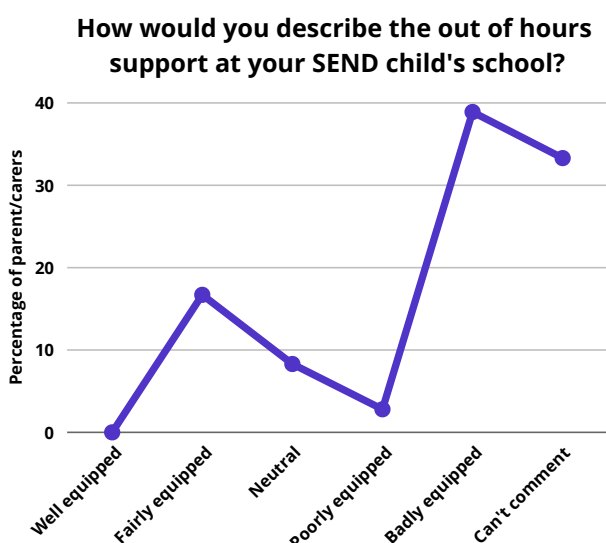
less reliance on whiteboards, more satellite classrooms, more quiet areas and widespread use of ear-defenders and fidget tools could benefit everybody, not just children with SEND. More SEND voices on school councils across the country may help to pick-up these types of issues.

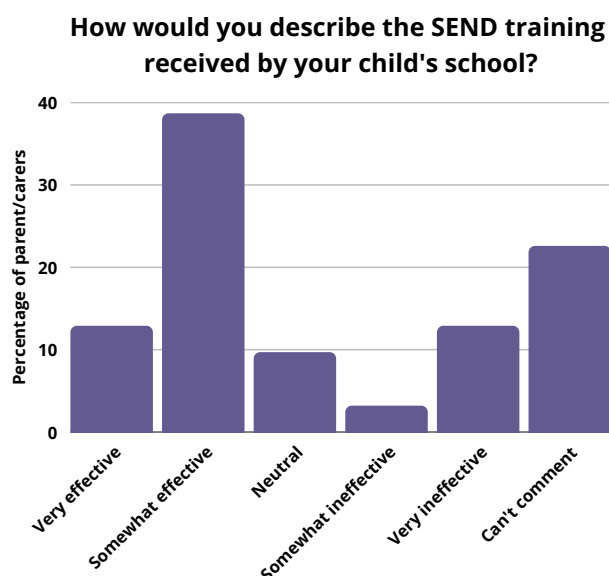
**“ There should be a statutory requirement for schools to proactively support children with SEND needs, with a Code of Practice with teeth should there be non-compliance by local authorities and/or schools ”**  
A parent/carer

Several roundtable participants raised concerns that accountability systems such as league tables and performance measures incentivise exclusion rather than inclusion. Schools under pressure to deliver academic results – especially in places like Rushcliffe which is known for achieving excellent pupil outcomes – may resist admitting or supporting higher-needs pupils. Parents described this as a “perverse incentive”, warning that unless accountability is reframed to value inclusion and differentiated progress, schools will continue to feel pulled in the wrong direction. It was notable that there was a round of applause at one roundtable session when a facilitator said that her table had advocated for no school being awarded an ‘outstanding’ grade by Ofsted without SEND provision meeting the same standard. This will be expanded on further in the final section of the report.

Mixed views on the creation of onsite SEND hubs

Some educators spoke positively about creating primary-school-based SEND hubs,





noting the eye-watering cost of transporting SEND children across Nottinghamshire to specialist provision each year (c.£28 million). It was noted that this money could fund at least two brand-new special schools. Where SEND hubs are appropriately funded and staffed, it was suggested that they could make a tangible difference – both by building teacher confidence about high-quality SEND provision in local communities, and by improving proximity to services for SEND children.

However, parents and carers were generally less certain about SEND hubs, and some were adamant that this approach wouldn't suffice because SEND hubs are largely thought and talked about as physical spaces. The 'good use of an empty classroom' argument was seen as unhelpful given large class sizes can be challenging for neurodiverse children, and parents/carers argued more should be done to create smaller mainstream classes using any extra space. There were also concerns that capital budgets were being prioritised over revenue increases which will be essential for staffing any new SEND hubs properly.

Educators also noted that there was a physical risk to SEND hubs that is rarely

discussed. Kicking, scratching and biting can all be exhibited by high-needs children. The average teaching assistant is not trained to work in this type of environment, and failure to recognise the physical demands of SEND hubs potentially risks creating another recruitment and retention challenge. As one educator said, we cannot “expect square pegs to fit into round holes” – meaning people willing to take on new, more complex SEND roles should be trained and remunerated appropriately. It was argued that the traditional teaching assistant role has evolved significantly since it was first introduced, without an appropriate uplift in investment, remuneration or respect.



***We need to make teaching assistant wages more desirable in order to match the hard work they do to support teachers and children with additional needs. They are the most valuable resource in our schools***

A Rushcliffe educator



Ultimately, it was concluded that a 'hub and spoke' structure of SEND hubs linked to special schools would be required, with guaranteed expertise and capacity across linked localities, for this approach to be successful. Participants suggested that peer networks between schools with SEND hubs – for sharing resources, expertise and good practice – would also be needed, with reassurances that no single school becomes the “magnet” for all SEND pupils in a particular community because it embraces 'inclusion' more effectively than others.

#### *Transition points and continuity*

Finally, as briefly alluded to earlier, roundtable participants noted that transitions – between nursery and primary,

primary and secondary, or into post-16 education – are especially fragile points for children with SEND. Support put in place in one setting is often lost in the move to another. One parent recalled, “Everything was fine until secondary, then it all fractured.”

Educators explained that secondary schools, often much larger and more regimented, can be overwhelming for SEND children. Pupils accustomed to close relationships in smaller primary settings may suddenly face busy corridors, strict uniform rules and little flexibility in an exam-centric curriculum. Without continuity of support, SEND children can quickly disengage, leading to a rise in school avoidance. At least one educator advocated for greater flexibility when it comes to moving SEND children between different education settings, including allowing them to remain in early years settings for an additional year where helpful.

Parents and carers said that EHCPs and SEND support should “travel with the child”, with clear continuity planning built into every transition. They called for earlier preparation, more information-sharing between schools and greater parental

involvement in transition planning. As one parent noted, “It shouldn’t feel like you’re starting again every year.”

Participants also stressed the importance of alternative pathways being available at transition stages, including shifts to vocational and life skills teaching routes coordinated by SENDCOs, rather than a one-size-fits-all academic model which, in some secondary schools, sees pupils streamed from Year 7 onwards. Less academic approaches were not seen by parents, carers or educators as lowering expectations, but as tailoring education to a SEND child’s strengths and ensuring children and their families are set up to succeed as early as possible.

**“ Children without EHCPs are excluded from provisions like ours, yet they are unable to cope in mainstream settings. Instead of therapeutic alternatives, they are pushed into inappropriate academic routes that fail to meet their needs ”**  
An alternative provider

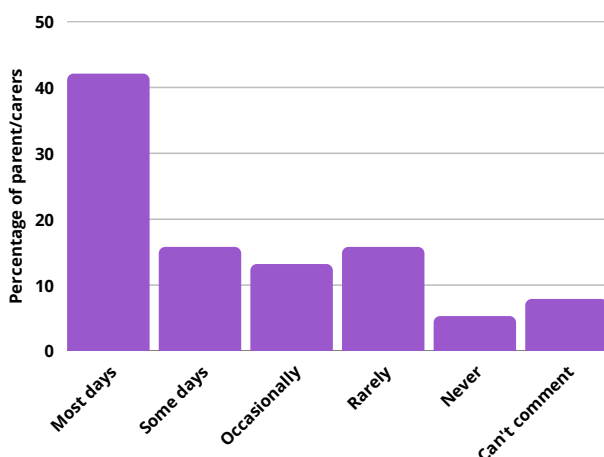
**Section 4: Funding, accountability and trust in the system**

The roundtable discussions concluded with conversations about future funding, accountability and what would be required to re-establish trust in the SEND system.

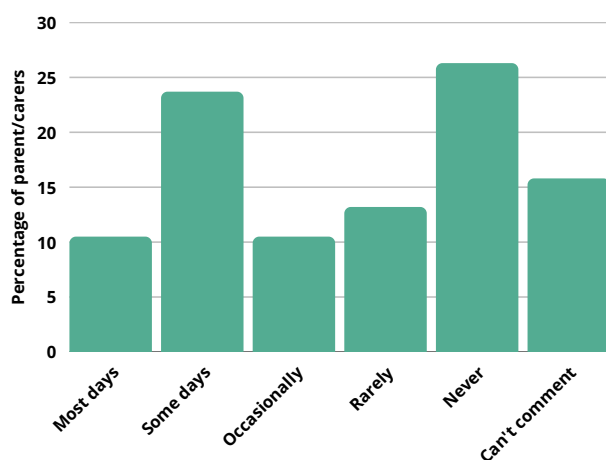
Financial pressures, deficits and confusion

A dominant theme across all three sessions was the sheer weight of financial pressure bearing down on local authorities and schools. SEND provision was consistently described as “running ahead of the budget” by educators, with deficits mounting year on

**How often do you feel that your child's SEND needs are misunderstood or ignored by school staff?**



**How often does your SEND child miss school due to unmet SEND needs?**



year. One headteacher said, “Our deficits are growing faster than our ability to meet them.” Another educator expressed the frustration felt in many schools, saying “We keep being told to do more with less.” The £6,000 notional SEND funding per pupil, which hasn’t been updated since 2014, was criticised for “barely scratching the surface” of additional costs; and it was widely recognised that EHCPs only cover a percentage of the costs of teaching assistants who, in reality, are often exclusively focused on higher-needs children.

Parents and carers were acutely aware of these issues and far from being insulated from financial debates between headteachers and governors, many spoke about how they felt their school’s money pressures directly impacted support decisions. One parent asked almost rhetorically, “I often wonder: will my child become a victim of future budget decisions?” This sense of vulnerability – that support might hinge less on need and more on whether the books can be balanced – was a recurring concern. One educator was clear that “Education is running on goodwill” and suggested that “Schools have had to get really good at begging for things.”

Nationally, councils have sounded the alarm for many years, warning that deficits in SEND spending could push some local authorities towards bankruptcy without central government intervention. The situation in Nottinghamshire is particularly stark with a £31.1 million overspend expected by the County Council by the end of the current financial year (2025/26). This is partly driven by unfair funding with the average school in Nottinghamshire receiving £5,000 less per SEND pupil than some London local authorities according to the f40 campaign group.

Although ministers have pledged additional investment in specialist places and high-needs funding including £1 billion extra at the Autumn Budget 2024, participants questioned whether such promises are sufficient, sustained or reliably targeted. In the words of one headteacher, “We hear about new pots of money, but it never seems to reach the classroom.”

**“ We have ensured our high level SEND needs are provided for but this means taking support away from children with less significant SEND needs. Money has to be used from the general school budget**

A School Business Manager ”

Some participants were sceptical about the value of money being allocated to local authorities rather than directly to schools. However, everyone agreed that a lot of money attached to EHCPs is leaving the state sector to cover the costs of independent non-maintained schools (per-pupil costs are more than twice as high in the independent sector (£62,000 vs £24,000 per head on average))\*.

For many educators, they felt that this money could be better

\* From a 2025 Institute for Fiscal Studies article: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/englands-send-crisis-costs-challenges-and-case-reform>

spent across state-run special and mainstream schools.

Accountability mechanisms and perverse incentives

Running parallel to financial stress were concerns about accountability. As noted in other chapters, roundtable participants described how performance measures – whether Ofsted judgements, attainment targets, attendance figures or exclusion rates – can actively discourage inclusion.

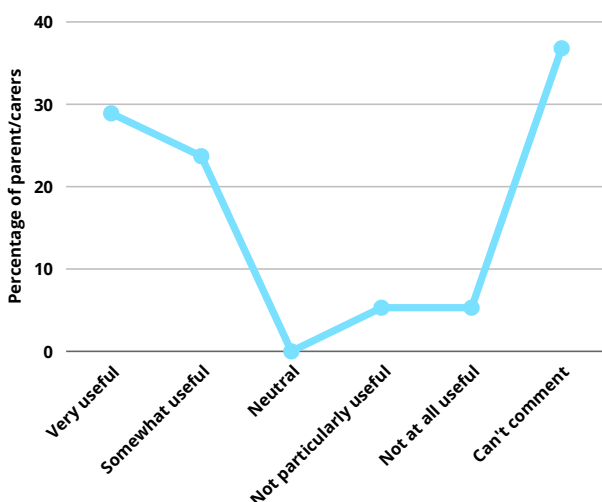
Indeed, it was widely suggested that some schools’ results – and their perceived success – can suffer for “doing the right thing” by admitting SEND pupils. Conversely, it was suggested that some schools subtly avoid this scenario by discouraging new joiners with SEND or off-rolling difficult pupils. Families said it often feels like the system is designed to manage numbers and results, rather than identify the best possible support for SEND children. This was perceived to be a bigger problem in a world of academisation where local authorities are no longer solely responsible for meeting SEND, despite academy trusts lacking the same democratic accountability and scrutiny. One parent lamented how

“Education has become corporate” and advocated for a return to more transparent systems where attainment is measured primarily against each child’s starting point, rather than local or national indicators.

**“SEND experts should actively be involved in the day-to-day running and assessment of mainstream schools. Not just Ofsted which repeatedly fails to acknowledge the extent of SEND problems in mainstream schools”**  
A parent/carer

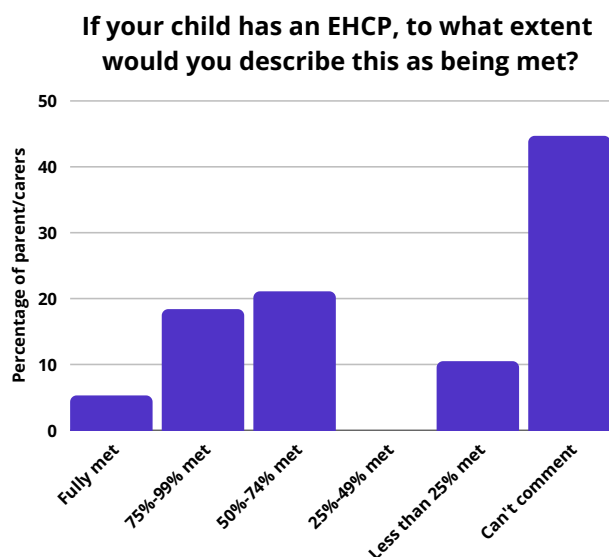
Building on the quote above, several parents reflected on the way parental voices are gathered and represented in Ofsted inspections and reviews. While some parents/carers welcomed opportunities to contribute, there was frustration that their input often feels tokenistic or constrained. One parent noted that at a recent ‘open meeting’, individuals were given less than four minutes each to share their experiences. One educator suggested that SEND inspections should take place independently from broader Ofsted inspections, led by a specialist set of inspectors responsible for a dedicated report. This proposal was endorsed by other participants on the same table – although the extra burden on teachers and schools would have to be carefully considered.

**If your child has an EHCP, how useful would you describe this as being?**



Transparency, data and confidence

Underlying these concerns was a question of transparency. Families and educators alike called for clearer data – on waiting times, EHCP processing times, outcomes, inclusion rates etc. – broken down by authority and updated regularly. One parent suggested that a dashboard or tracker could help both families and schools monitor progress, while



also holding local authorities to account.

Some educators warned that the lack of consistent reporting makes it easier for underperformance to be hidden. They described instances where classifications were shifted or ambiguous labels used to give the appearance of SEND support when, in reality, little was being provided. Without robust and reliable data, systemic issues remain concealed and families can be left without evidence to press their case.

### Local authority role, autonomy and capacity

Despite frustrations with processes, most participants were clear that local authorities must retain a central role in SEND coordination. Councils, they argued, remain uniquely placed to commission services, plan provision across schools and maintain oversight of quality. Removing them from the picture risks fragmenting the system even further – although at least one participant argued that more money should be given directly to schools, avoiding the middleman.

However, many also acknowledged that local authorities themselves are under

severe strain. One participant employed by a local authority said, “We have been hollowed out structurally over ten years.” The result, they explained, is that statutory duties remain on paper but the workforce to deliver them has been stripped away.

Several contributors suggested that reform should, therefore, include a clear plan for capacity-building at a local level – investment in skilled staff, shared services and minimum service standards, overseen nationally. This should end the absurdity of families living just a few miles apart facing contrasting realities. It was also suggested that all local authorities should use the same nationally-agreed interpretation of SEND levels to avoid situations where a child with certain needs in one part of the country can be receiving £2,000 extra than an identical child in a different part of the country.

**“The current system in Notts is failing the county’s most vulnerable children. Many have been missing from education for long periods, while others are left without placements because there are not enough specialist schools to meet the demand**  
An alternative provider”

### Building or rebuilding trust

Running through all of these themes was a deeper issue: trust. Families spoke of having to “fight for every bit of support”, while educators described feeling squeezed between expectation and constraint. One parent’s words captured the mood of many, saying “We’ve heard too many broken promises already.” They advocated for civil servants to leave Whitehall for a few days every year to join school staff up and down the country, to see and experience the day-

to-day challenges that they face.

The erosion of trust was not simply about individual delays or decisions but about a long history of inconsistent provision, shifting criteria and reforms that felt more like cuts than improvements. Families wanted assurance that they were genuinely going to be listened to rather than labelled; that reforms would take a long-term view that reduces fragmentation; and that reforms will centre on improving the state’s commitment to SEND children – not as a way of managing financial or legal deficits. There was also a plea for reducing the complexity and volume of paperwork so parents, educators and Allied Healthcare Professionals (AHPs) can all spend more time helping SEND children. “We’ve got to be able to see and feel the changes”, one parent said repeatedly.

Participants emphasised that rebuilding trust will require greater clarity, enhanced training, clearer accountability with independent scrutiny, and short-term injections of funding to stabilise the current SEND architecture. Promises must be realistic and delivered; funding must be transparent and equitable across different parts of the country; and families must feel

respected as partners rather than adversaries. For many, the forthcoming *Schools White Paper* represents a critical opportunity which, if handled well, could restore belief in a system that too many now view with suspicion. If handled poorly, as noted at the outset, it risks deepening the very divisions it seeks to address.

**Conclusion**

Let me conclude by sharing an email that I received on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2025 from a young constituent, the content of which should be self-explanatory:

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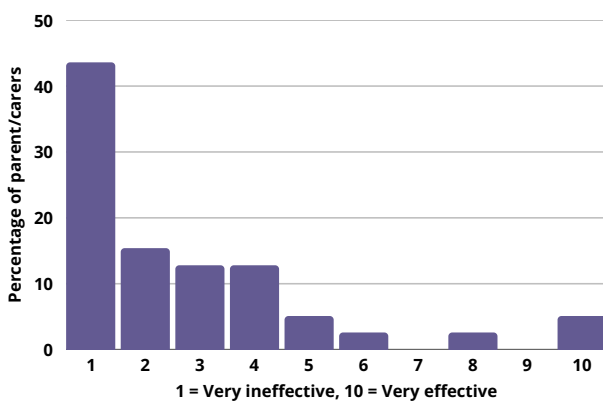
*Dear James Naish MP,*

*My name is <> and I am a teenager living in your constituency. I have FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) and ADHD, and right now I don’t have a school place. I wanted to write to you myself because this is something that affects me every day.*

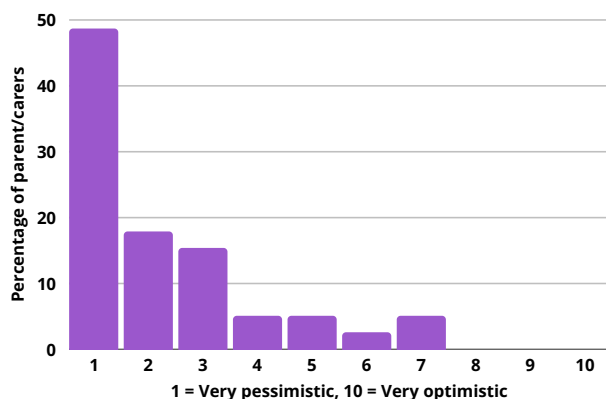
*I find school environments very hard. The noise, the crowds, and the pace makes it difficult for me to cope. But even though school is challenging, I really miss being around people my own age. I miss learning with others and having the chance to make friends. At the moment , I feel stuck between two worlds: I can’t manage a mainstream classroom, but there doesn’t seem to be a good alternative where I can still learn, grow, and be with my peers. It feels like there is a gap in the education system for young people like me. We are not asking for less education, just a different kind that works for us.*

*I believe there should be more flexible and*

**Overall, on a scale of 1 to 10, how effective would you rate the current SEND system?**



**On a scale of 1–10, how optimistic are you about the system improving over the next five years?**



*creative options that understand SEND needs, so teenagers like me don't get left out or forgotten.*

*Please can you help by raising this issue and encouraging a rethink of how education is provided for young people who find school environments tricky? We need places where we can learn, feel safe, and still have a chance to be with friends and be part of a community.*

*Thank you for listening to me. I hope you can use your position to help make a difference for me and others like me.*

\*\*

Like most MPs, I genuinely hope that I can use my position, however short or long it lasts, to help make a difference for this constituent and many others. When it comes to SEND, the truth is that there have already been lots of reports written about the crisis, without comprehensive, meaningful action being taken. We must change that now.

Indeed, the three roundtables in Rushcliffe reiterated to me an underlying urgency for strategic intervention which simply cannot be ignored. It is clear that the current SEND

architecture is under pressure, failing families while frustrating schools and eroding trust at all levels. The forthcoming *Schools White Paper* must not shy away from difficult trade-offs, but it must do so transparently and in partnership with stakeholders.

Below are recommendations drawn from the themed discussions captured above. As I said at the outset, this list doesn't adequately reflect all the experiences that I've been told about in recent months and it isn't exhaustive – but I hope that the Department for Education will adopt many of the principles behind it. Only then will we be able to start rebuilding the trust that sits at the heart of the relationship between the state, educators, parents and carers who all aspire to raise aspirations and ultimately give every child the very best start in life.

# Recommendations

## 1. Embed early support and pre-diagnostic pathways

- Mandate screening in early years and Key Stage 1 for speech, attention, communication and social indicators.
- Invest urgently in the broad adoption of early intervention programmes like the Nuffield Early Language Intervention or the Early Language Support for Every Child programmes.
- Fund cross-agency hubs (health, education, social care) to co-locate screening and early intervention, ideally near or in school settings.
- Invest in practical measures such as dedicated parent support officers, workshops and community outreach to help families navigate the complex system more effectively.
- Ensure rural and underserved communities have equitable access to screening, referral and alternative provision mechanisms.

## 2. Streamline assessment and EHCP processes

- Lower or clarify thresholds for EHCPs, with a “fast track” or emergency funding route for new

- high-risk cases.
- Create a light-touch EHCP to ‘get the ball rolling’ in early years.
- Strengthen co-production during the EHCP process including iterative feedback loops.
- Support and encourage regular reviews and amendments to EHCPs, especially during transition or significant change periods.
- Safeguard legal rights – retain or clearly replace EHCP protections and ensure appeal pathways remain robust.

## 3. Strengthen inclusion capacity in mainstream schools

- Introduce a nationwide SEND professional development programme for educators with tiered accreditation.
- Fund and embed new specialist roles (e.g. autism leads, behaviour coordinators) in all schools.
- Create a ‘hub and spoke’ system of SEND hubs linked to special schools, with guaranteed expertise and capacity across linked localities.
- Ensure SEND support is portable across transitions and transitions are

the subject of appropriate preparation.

- Start providing alternative pathways for SEND children from at least Key Stage 3, including a greater emphasis on vocational and life skills teaching routes – rather than a one-size-fits-all academic model.
- Recognise the SEND contribution of all Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) including physios and occupational therapists, particularly in addressing sensory challenges related to sound, touch and movement.

#### 4. Reform funding, accountability and rebuild trust

- Explicitly address historic SEND deficits between local authorities.
- Make funding formulas transparent and consistent.
- Use the same nationally agreed interpretation of SEND levels.
- Reform accountability so that inclusion and support, not just academic attainment, count in school evaluations. This could be done by more explicitly linking a school's Ofsted grade to the quality of its SEND provision; by introducing dedicated or specialist SEND inspections; and/or by embedding inclusion and SEND outcomes within school performance metrics.

- Provide greater clarity about the accountability between local authorities and academy trusts.
- Put meeting SEND more central to the aims of the NHS.
- Produce open dashboards of SEND performance metrics at local and national levels.
- Publish a plan for capacity-building at a local level – investment in skilled staff, shared services and minimum service standards, overseen nationally.
- Establish independent grievance and mediation mechanisms that foster trust, not adversarial contention.

#### 5. Co-creation and phased implementation of reforms

- Use a staged reform approach, piloting in areas with strong local buy-in before full rollout.
- Engage parents, carers, educators and local authorities centrally in design, not just consultation.
- Guarantee that children already under EHCPs will maintain their current level of support during any transition period.
- Build in review points, independent auditing and flexibility to course-correct the future reform journey.

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