

SEND Reforms: Early Years Priorities

The current special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system is not working for the 1.7 million children with identified SEND who are being denied the opportunity to play, learn, grow and thrive. Children, young people and their families eagerly await news of Government's plans for reform in an imminent Schools White Paper.

About us: Kids is a national charity supporting disabled children, young people (0-25) and their families. We reach 22,000 people annually through specialist services that promote learning, play, wellbeing and social development. Our services include inclusive nurseries and early years groups, youth clubs and crisis support, alongside expert advice to help families navigate the complex SEND system.

Early years policy priorities

Setting Support

Inclusive provision and workforce development

A truly inclusive early years setting can be achieved with a workforce who are equipped with the proper knowledge, skills and understanding of SEND that allows them to recognise those who may have additional needs and adapt their practice accordingly.

Currently, the lack of training and confidence to meet SEND needs, alongside complex and inadequate SEND funding, mean that the majority of early years settings are not inclusive. Children with SEND or emerging needs are frequently turned away from settings, told that they can only be offered reduced hours, or parents are asked to collect their child when the staff feel unable to deal with the child's needs.

These challenges are acknowledged in the Best Start in Life Strategy (BSiL): parents of children with SEND are unable to return to work, and their children are missing out on their early education and the opportunity to learn and socialise with other children. We welcome the plans within BSiL for strengthening and increasing the early years workforce, and we support the Government's vision of 'making inclusive practice standard practice' through high quality training in SEND.

Professional development is a powerful lever for improving quality of provision within the early years. Training and professional development of early years staff must be built on a foundation of evidence-based, high-quality practice, which will meet the needs of the majority of children with SEND. This foundation must be supplemented with face-to-face, condition-specific training in the most prevalent conditions in current SEND cohorts: autism, ADHD, speech and language, and social emotional and mental health conditions.

We recommend the implementation of a face-to-face module on SEND within all level 3 practitioner courses – particularly in light of BSiL's plans to recruit and upskill more early years professionals to a level 3 qualification. We also recommend that training for both level 2 and 3 practitioners equips them with the skills to identify potential underlying needs. For example, practitioners should be able to understand and recognise difference, not just that a child is not meeting expected milestones but potential fundamental difference pointing to for example, evidence of neurodiversity. This would enable underlying conditions to be identified earlier, allowing early interventions and links with health teams.

Recommendations

- Review and invest in the early years workforce – both in recruitment and training – through a comprehensive workforce plan.
- Review training and CPD for the early years workforce, incorporating a requirement as part of core training for the workforce to work directly with children with SEND during training to equip practitioners with real-world skills and experience.

Funding and data collection

Currently, the Early Years funding streams for children with SEND are insufficient, convoluted and difficult to apply for. Many nurseries don't even know that there is funding to help them support babies and toddlers with SEND and if they do, they face significant barriers in applying for funding, reflected by the fact that just 29% of local authorities in England have enough childcare for at least 75% of children with SEND in their area (Coram Family and Childcare's 24th Annual survey).

Many parents of SEND children are unable to access the 15/30 hour childcare entitlements and whilst the Family/SEN Hubs are covering 15 hours for 22 children at Kids' Basingstoke Nursery, the Local Authority have told Kids that it will not be possible to cover the costs for these children to access the new 30-hour entitlement. At other early years settings children with SEND are frequently on reduced hours or simply turned away altogether.

National level

Children with SEND are not counted or recorded in any consistent way in the early years and there is no statutory duty to do so. There is no available data source or robust measure for how many 0-5 year olds there are with SEND in any local area as a starting point to reliably calculate funding requirements. Lack of reliable data is a significant barrier to effective planning and funding for SEND needs.

This lack of data creates significant problems for accurately and fairly implementing the early years national funding formulae (EYNFF). National funding is split between 'base funding' and 'additional needs funding'. The formulae for the 'additional needs' category is based on proxies for these 'additional needs' children, including those who may have SEND, due to lack of reliable data on the actual number of children with SEND in a local area. We are pleased to see a commitment to reviewing the national funding formulae in the *Giving every child the Best Start in Life* strategy.

Recommendations

- Review all systems of data collection for under-5s and develop a plan for more accurate local statutory data collection to provide a clearer basis for predicting local SEND funding needs and calculations.
- Apply fairer weighting of the 'additional needs' part of the EYFF funding to local authorities based on accurate local data.
- Review and improve the proxies for calculating how many SEND children there may be in an area (for example, looking at local school data for SEND children in Reception/Year 1).

Local level

Settings face barriers to accessing additional SEND funds. The SEN inclusion fund (SENIF) and Disability Access Fund (DAF) are very difficult to apply for, and we welcome the Best Start in Life Strategy's acknowledgement of this and commitment to working with local authorities to address this.

Early years providers must monitor children for at least one term to evidence potential SEND indicators before applying for SENIF funding, which is subject to Local Authority approval and often delayed, leaving nurseries to cover costs upfront. Even when funding is granted, it is insufficient and must be used for multiple SEND children in the same group, limiting nurseries' ability to offer dedicated SEND spaces. Additionally, access to the DAF is limited to families receiving the Disability Living Allowance (DLA), excluding many children without a formal diagnosis and placing further financial strain on settings.

Recommendations

- Review administration and implementation of the SEN Inclusion Funding (SENIF) with a view to simplifying application and access to funds for EY settings.
- Unlink DAF from DLA to ensure more settings can access this funding to support children with SEND.

Family Support

The importance of whole-family support, parent partnerships and co-production

We were very pleased to see recognition in BSIL of the need for professionals from across health and education to work collaboratively and holistically with children and families. We warmly welcome the roll out of Best Start Family Hubs across all local areas and were particularly pleased to see the inclusion of a professional at each Hub trained to support parents of children with additional needs.

We know that this model works well for children with SEND: at Kids' Basingstoke Nursery we work collaboratively with parents and with other professionals involved in the child's life to provide consistent support across different settings. We ensure that parents feel listened to and supported, help them put other support and entitlements in place, and involve them in decisions about their child's care.

Settings should be incentivised to work in a child and family-centred way, alongside other health and care professionals to ensure regular communication and sharing of information between parents, the setting and other appropriate professionals. This approach is crucial to enabling early identification of SEND and early interventions to support development and learning. This is particularly relevant for children with speech,

language and communication challenges but also for those with potential neurodiverse conditions or social, emotional and mental health issues.

Recommendations

- Government should support Local Authorities to create infrastructure for parental consultation, meaningful participation, and community peer support networks to help improve experiences of service delivery.
- Local authorities must consult with families and parents/carers on services in the early years and early years settings must adopt a parent-partnership approach.
- Every family must have access to a SEND 'Navigator' to help them to navigate the SEND system, understand their rights and connect with professionals across health, care and education.

Cross agency working

At Kids all our early years services follow a model where parent-partnership is crucial to the success of the support the child receives. We centre both the child, and parents in all our work and ensure that we always work in partnership with parents, acknowledging and respecting their views and appreciating that they are experts in their child's needs.

A recent study showed the benefits of Sure Start centres, including the positive outcome the early interventions from education and health services had on children with SEND. The research found that the Sure Start programme *'improved educational outcomes and health, and reduced school absences and less severe special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)'*¹. We warmly welcome the announcement of Best Start Family Hubs in every local area. Revitalising and extending services 'under one roof' will greatly support early identification and prevent the devastating long-term impacts of unmet need.

Since the closure of the Sure Start centres, there is very little community provision for families of SEND children and very little contact with professionals who may be able to flag issues and enable earlier interventions, assessments and diagnosis. Young children are effectively locked out of early years provision if they have SEND or emerging needs. Families are often not seeing early years professionals apart from at the 2-year health check (although we have heard from some families that health visitor services are no longer face-to-face with some areas not even having any in-person weigh-in clinics anymore).

Kids' early years services and practitioners report that higher thresholds now exist for access to key professionals such as speech and language therapists and physiotherapists. Kids' Basingstoke Nursery has had to upskill staff and pay for resources in order to provide these types of services in-house to children who need them. Equally, Kids' Basingstoke Nursery is using DAF money to purchase occupational therapy services because occupational therapy is no longer commissioned locally. It is extremely costly to purchase these services privately but they are a necessity for many children with SEND.

Early education (nursery staff), health professionals such as speech and language or Occupational Therapists, and community support for parents are all crucial to giving children with SEND the best start in life. These services must be jointly commissioned, and professionals across health, education, care and community services must work together to holistically support families. This was the Sure Start model and there is strong evidence that this way of working led to far more early interventions of support and better life outcomes for both children and parents.

Recommendations

- Develop a workforce strategy to ensure sufficient supply of specialist professionals including Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists and Educational Psychologists.
- Mandate health and education professionals to work jointly and to share data and assessments through data-sharing agreements. This must be supported by joint funding allocated from the DHSC and the DfE.
- Ensure joint local accountability between local authorities and Integrated Care Boards working with the early education and childcare sector and schools, to implement a new common outcomes framework (as recommended by NCB summit on EY).
- Develop a joint EY funding strategy from DHSC and DfE.
- Implement joint commissioning at local level between ICBs and local authorities, co-produced with parents and the third sector.

¹ *Sure Start's wide-ranging and long-lasting benefits highlight the impact of integrated early years services | Institute for Fiscal Studies*