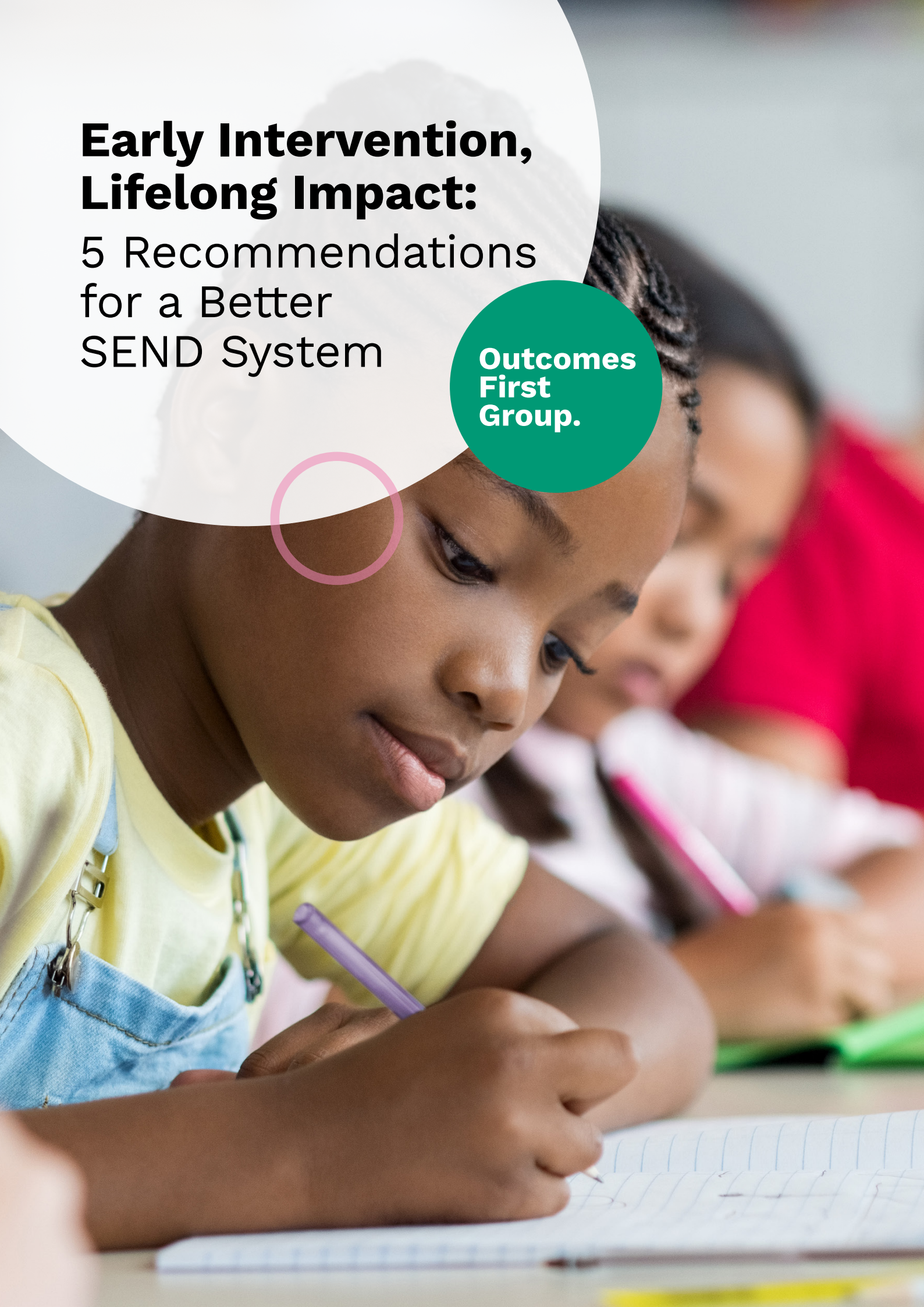


Early Intervention, Lifelong Impact:

5 Recommendations
for a Better
SEND System

Outcomes
First
Group.





Outcomes First Group - Expert leadership in the SEND sector

Outcomes First Group (OFG) is the UK's leading provider of specialist education for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), working with over 150 local authorities to deliver high-quality education and help young people achieve their potential. Over 98% of our schools are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, a testament to our rigorous quality standards and innovative practices, like Trauma Informed Practice (TIP) and the 'Ask, Accept, and Develop' (AAD) approach, which set the standard in SEND education.

OFG are committed to working in partnership with policymakers, educators and local authorities to support children and young people with SEND and their families. Through flexible, smart commissioning, we are able to deliver cost-effective, scalable services tailored to local needs. Our collaborative approach has enabled over 4,000 children to access the highest quality support, changing life trajectories for good.

In response to growing demand, OFG is already expanding into earlier intervention, supporting government goals to ensure all children can access the right support at the right time to prevent needs from escalating. With plans to expand our Momenta Connect offer into more mainstream settings, we are ideally positioned to support the development of a more inclusive, effective SEND system for the future.

Foreword

Andre Imich OBE,

OFG Safeguarding & Quality Board

Whether from first-hand experience delivering SEND support on the frontline, or from our engagement with the nuts and bolts of policy and research, we all know that the SEND system is facing enormous challenges.

The increasing reliance on education, health, and care plans (EHCPs) has strained local authorities and slowed response times, leaving far too many children – many of whom have experienced trauma – without essential, timely intervention. Further compounding this issue, access to earlier intervention has been reduced in order to provide more critical, intensive interventions, creating a vicious cycle whereby opportunities to tackle challenges early are missed. Local authorities and schools are left to commission support later, when problems have worsened, and the young person needs more expensive, intensive support.

Rather than revisiting these challenges, this report sets out the **five central recommendations for a better SEND system** built on the principles of earlier, timely intervention. We believe these recommendations offer genuine solutions for children and young people with SEND, their families, and local authorities.

While funding is critical, it alone will not solve the problem. What is needed are decisive adjustments to the current system that reduce the reliance on EHCPs, improves intervention for children, and lead to parents having greater confidence that their children's needs are being met appropriately within mainstream school settings.

We know that the present model of assessment does not adequately identify or address the diverse range of SEND challenges that children and young people of today are facing. Instead, we have a system where those with EHCPs can access specialist provision, whilst the majority of those with SEND but without EHCPs – including many neurodivergent young people – are left unable to access support or additional funding.

We need to develop a system built on earlier, timely intervention, a child-centric approach that provides the right level of support dependent on need, stronger SEND inclusive practices within mainstream schools, and better links between mainstream settings and specialist provision.

In all of these areas, most specialist providers are already taking steps to help address gaps and share their expertise and best practice with mainstream schools in their community – and local authorities are keen to embrace innovative approaches. But for these services to scale up, the Government must pursue an ambitious, well-funded reform agenda that prioritises earlier, timely intervention for all children and young people with SEND and enables mainstream schools to take a more inclusive approach.

The result of getting this right is a SEND system that can meet the needs of more young people at the right time, easing the current challenges on families, schools, and local authorities – ensuring that every child has the support they need to succeed. **Quite simply, early, timely intervention is both a practical necessity and a moral imperative to ensure an education system that leaves no child behind.**

Executive summary

The SEND system is at a critical juncture. Current demand far exceeds available resources, and the reliance on EHCPs as the primary pathway to support has created bottlenecks, leaving countless children and young people without the timely support they need to succeed. **Earlier, timely intervention** is essential to addressing these challenges and reducing the number of students needing high-intensity support.

With a new Government Advisory Board poised to review the policy landscape and the Children’s Wellbeing Bill on the horizon, now is the time for bold reform. Drawing on the expertise and experience of Outcomes First Group - the largest provider of specialist provision in England - this report sets out five recommendations for a better SEND system, each built upon the principles of earlier and timely intervention to ensure every child gets the **right support, at the right time**.

5 recommendations for a better SEND system:

1. Redesign the EHCP process and implement a tiered assessment model
2. Deliver specialist SEND training to educators and embed it in teacher education
3. Expand flexible learning options by rolling out dedicated SEND units in mainstream schools
4. Support pupils to re-integrate into mainstream schools and develop academic and personal development performance metrics which encourage schools to engage more pupils with SEND
5. Strengthen local SEND Information, Advice and Support Services for families



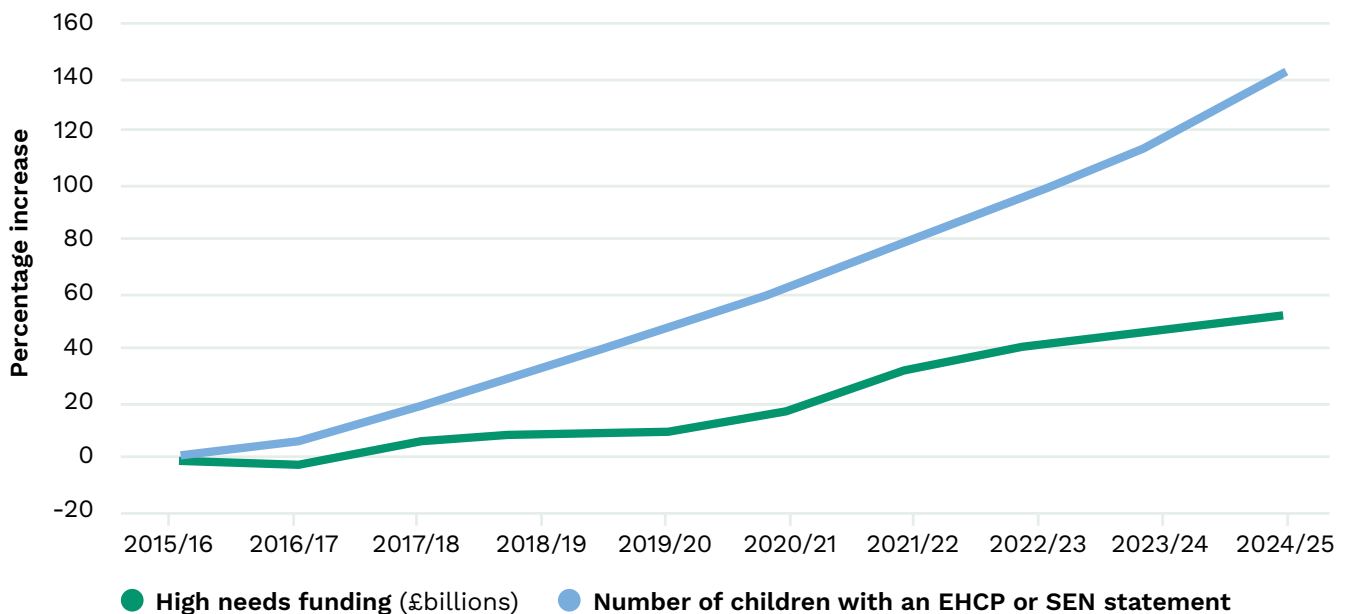
The landscape

The current SEND system in England is overstretched. Despite reforms such as the Children and Families Act 2014, demand for support has far outpaced available resources, leaving families, schools, and local authorities in crisis.

Local authorities have simply struggled to keep pace, with a recent National Audit Office report finding that 40% of councils are at risk of financial insolvency by 2026 due to the rising demand for specialist provision. This has led families to seek alternative, specialist settings that remove children from their local communities and opportunities for inclusive education.

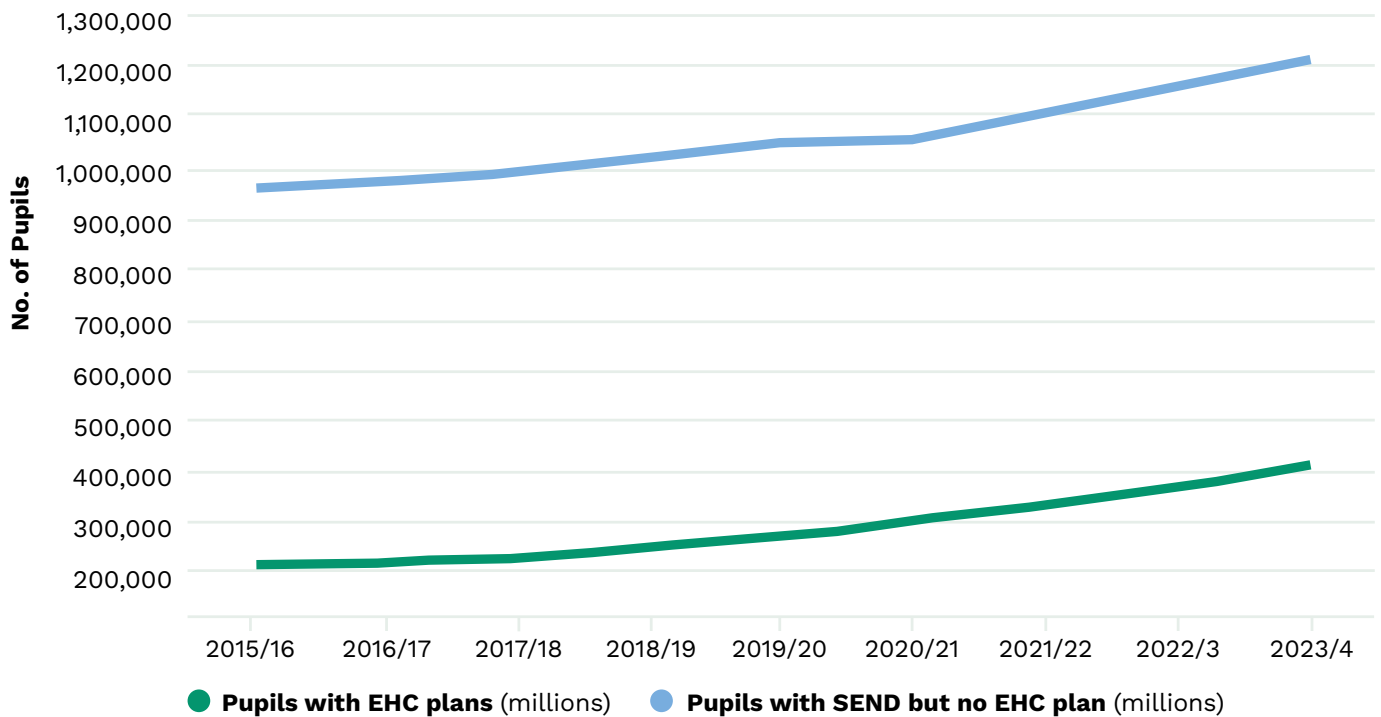
For many parents and carers, the driving force behind this decision is that mainstream schools often lack the resources, staff training, and adaptability to fully support SEND students. And their concerns are well-founded – since 2015, the number of children and young people with an EHCP has increased by 140%, whilst high needs funding has increased by only 52%.

Relative growth in the number of children with EHCP or SEN statements vs local authorities' high needs funding, 2015 to 2024



Whilst some children will always need specialist provision, many should and could thrive in mainstream education if only the right support was in place. Data shows a significant and growing gap between the total number of pupils identified with SEND and those who have an EHCP, reflecting the fact that the EHCP does not adequately cater to the full diversity of needs, with some children – mostly with milder SEND needs – falling through the cracks. With the right training and facilities, appropriate support for these children could be delivered in mainstream settings yet many are left unable to access any additional support or funding at all. For many SEND pupils, this causes their challenges to worsen with long-term negative consequences.

Number of pupils SEN compared to EHC plans



Several factors hold inclusion back, not least a lack of trained staff, suitable facilities, and the pressure on schools to maintain high performance metrics, including attendance and attainment, which discourages some schools from admitting or retaining SEND students.

Ultimately EHCPs, while essential for more severe SEND cases, have become a bottleneck. The sole reliance on EHCPs results in lengthy waiting times – sometimes in excess of a year – during which time issues often escalate. The 2023 SEND Review acknowledged that this overreliance on EHCPs and specialist settings diverts resources from early and timely interventions in mainstream settings. In the year since, pressures have only got worse.

Where next?

On entering office after Labour’s landslide victory, Bridget Phillipson pledged to ‘grip’ the issue of support for SEND children and young people. At the beginning of November 2024, she announced plans to boost inclusiveness in mainstream settings for young people with SEND through establishing specialist units and carrying out a review into inclusion for neurodiverse young people.

However, there is significant pressure facing the Department for Education. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, has emphasised spending restraint, so any approach to supporting children with SEND must be shown to be cost-effective and a way of saving money in the long run to stand a chance of attracting government investment.

The proposed Children’s Wellbeing Bill, expected to be introduced to Parliament in the coming months, is the Government’s first legislative chance to demonstrate its commitment to SEND support and earlier, timely intervention in Parliament. The following sections sets out our recommendations for how this can be best achieved.



A Blueprint for Earlier and Timely Intervention

We need to move away from a crisis-driven system and shift to proactive support that empowers teachers, parents, and professionals to address issues as they arise, rather than waiting for them to escalate.

Earlier, timely intervention enables more children and young people with SEND to thrive within mainstream settings, reserving specialist provision for those with more severe SEND needs.

Research shows that timely intervention leads to measurable improvements: a significant reduction in child protection referrals and improved literacy and numeracy outcomes that enhance employability and long-term mental health (Early Intervention Foundation). And investment in earlier intervention means that fewer children and young people will need specialist provision to deal with their challenges, relieving local authorities of costly, intensive interventions, as well as minimising lifelong reliance on state support.

5 Recommendations for a Better SEND system

Drawing on OFG’s experience and expertise, this blueprint outlines five key policy recommendations to embed earlier and timely intervention across the SEND landscape. By addressing assessment, training, flexible learning, reintegration, and family confidence, these recommendations aim to create a sustainable system that better meets the needs of children and young people with SEND.

1. Redesign the EHCP process and implement a tiered assessment model

EHCPs have become the primary mechanism through which children with SEND access necessary support. While important for more severe SEND cases, EHCPs do not recognise or cater to the wider spectrum of special educational needs – leaving many young people with less intensive needs without the support they need to thrive. This has resulted in a two-track system, with a large majority of children and young people with SEND unable to access any effective support at all.

The emphasis on EHCPs and specialist provision has resulted in skyrocketing costs and unacceptable shortages of support for those who could benefit from more immediate, flexible support in mainstream settings. This is borne out by the long waiting lists – with some having to wait for over a year before receiving help – during which children and young people’s needs may intensify.

EHCPs are not the only solution. Some children and young people will always have complex needs that demand specialist, intensive provision and EHCPs play a valuable role as a ‘passport’ to ensure they can access that provision. But to ensure that all SEND needs are met, schools must be able to provide immediate support, which means additional resource, through alternative, flexible pathways for those with less intensive needs.

1. Our Recommendation:

A reformed assessment system must integrate a redesigned EHCP process within a tiered model, creating a more responsive and efficient structure. The EHCP process should be streamlined and simplified, reserved for more severe SEND cases requiring comprehensive and specialist intervention.

At the same time, flexible, alternative assessment pathways must be introduced to address the full range of SEND needs.

The proposed tiered assessment model would include:

- **Baseline assessments:** Conducted by trained educators in schools, these assessments would identify early-stage needs and provide immediate, low-level support.
- **Targeted assessments:** Specialist interventions addressing specific challenges, allowing students to access focused support quickly.
- **Comprehensive assessments:** Reserved for the most complex cases, requiring EHCPs and specialist input to deliver intensive, tailored support.

A look at how other countries assess SEND needs offers valuable insights into creating a more efficient system:



Finland

Finland's system prioritises early intervention, with teachers playing a pivotal role in identifying SEND needs directly within the classroom.

Finnish teachers receive training to recognise learning difficulties and can implement immediate, flexible support without the need for formal referrals.

This system enables a preventative, rather than reactive, approach to SEND support, ensuring that students' needs are met promptly and inclusively.



Denmark

Denmark employs a structured, tiered model of SEND assessment that begins with in-class evaluations conducted by teachers. This initial stage provides support for students within mainstream classrooms. If further assistance is required, the model escalates to include specialist input and tailored interventions. Immediate, flexible support without the need for formal referrals.

This system enables a preventative, rather than reactive, approach to SEND support, ensuring that students' needs are met promptly and inclusively.



New Zealand

New Zealand's Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTL) service offers a highly adaptable approach to SEND assessment.

Through this service, teachers can access specialist support on-demand, allowing them to address students' needs immediately, often without a formalised plan and without delay.

2. Deliver specialist SEND training to educators and embed it in teacher education

Teachers are at the forefront of identifying and supporting SEND needs, yet many feel ill-equipped to provide the necessary interventions. This is one of the biggest barriers facing the inclusion of children and young people with SEND needs in mainstream educational settings. For instance, research by the National Autistic Society reveals that while 70% of children with autism attend mainstream schools, only 14% of teachers have received training to support them effectively.

Whilst teachers at primary and secondary level are often the first to notice the development of SEND challenges or neurodiversity, they too often report not being sure how to support their SEND students to thrive in school. These challenges could be solved through continued professional development courses or be incorporated in teacher training – or, ideally, both – but without serious action to address this skills shortage, widespread mainstream inclusion for children with SEND will remain elusive.

Parents and students want to be supported by confident teachers who can identify and adequately address SEND challenges. Whether for those with learning disabilities, autism, or a plethora of other conditions, understanding, proactivity, and flexibility are essential. A revolution in SEND teacher training will deliver this.

2. Our Recommendation:

For nursery, primary and secondary school teachers, a core level of SEND training should be built into teacher training courses, enabling all teachers to play a critical role in delivering earlier, timely intervention. This training should equip teachers to assess and support children with a variety of SEND needs, including neurodiversity and trauma, reducing reliance on external, formal assessments. Schools should encourage teachers to engage in more specialist training as part of continuing professional development to ensure that quicker, tailored interventions can be delivered in mainstream settings where possible.

3. Expand flexible learning options by rolling out dedicated SEND units in mainstream schools

The pathway from assessment to comprehensive and high-quality in-school support is crucial and could be a key driver behind parent's trust and confidence in the SEND system. Once a student's needs are identified, immediate support should be readily available to prevent escalation and promote inclusion. Based on our experiences of supporting inclusion in mainstream settings, we believe that this support can best be provided through specialist SEND units within schools.

This idea is already being considered in Cornwall, where innovative schools are looking to set up such units for their children and young people with SEND. These units act as resource hubs, providing SEND students with immediate, tailored support without leaving their school community. These services would be provided by specialist staff, who could be either contracted directly from existing specialist providers or existing school staff could be upskilled to provide the needed support. By deploying specialist support in mainstream settings, parental confidence in SEND inclusion could also be bolstered.

Across the sector, services such as OFG's **Momenta Connect** are being developed to put these ideas into action, delivering timely and holistic support that caters to academic, social, and emotional needs.

The experiences of former Momenta Connect students, Alice and Chris, demonstrate how this approach works in practice and what it can achieve.

• **Flexible learning to meet individual needs**

Flexible learning supports students who face significant health or social challenges by enabling them to remain engaged with education when traditional school settings are inaccessible. It also forms a core part of alternative provision (AP). By offering tailored, flexible learning approaches—such as pre-recorded lessons and live online classes—AP allows students to learn at their own pace, reducing the pressure to conform to a rigid school timetable.

Alice's story exemplifies how flexible learning can support students in overcoming barriers. After taking time off due to illness, Alice struggled with severe anxiety about her GCSEs and found it difficult to catch up academically. The flexibility of AP, where she could review pre-recorded lessons and join live classes when ready, allowed her to close knowledge gaps at her own pace, without the added pressure of keeping up in a traditional classroom setting. Within just 12 weeks, Alice's attendance increased to 90%, and she achieved above-average scores in all her subjects.

• **Therapeutic support to address social and emotional needs**

For many SEND students, academic success depends on addressing underlying social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) challenges. Therapeutic support, from anxiety management to autism and speech therapy, gives students the tools to manage their emotions, build self-confidence, and re-engage in learning.

Chris's journey shows the transformative role of therapeutic support. After a year of exclusion following significant trauma, Chris found the classroom environment overwhelming. Through targeted SEMH interventions, he learned to self-regulate, taking breaks when needed and re-engaging with teacher support. Therapeutic support gave him the strategies to participate in live lessons, gradually increasing his confidence and attendance to 75%. For Chris, this approach offered a new beginning in education, making learning feel safe and achievable.

• **Strengthening school and family connections**

Attendance and welfare support are essential to creating stability and engagement for SEND students. By working collaboratively with schools and families, welfare services help identify and address attendance barriers, from safeguarding concerns to complex family dynamics. Proactive support, such as early intervention family work, attendance audits, and tailored school training, helps students feel valued and supported across every aspect of their educational journey.

Alice and Chris both benefited from this approach. For Alice, ongoing welfare support provided reassurance during periods of illness and hospital visits, keeping her connected to school even when circumstances were difficult. Meanwhile, Chris thrived on the structure provided by attendance support, allowing him to attend sports coaching and library study sessions regularly. This approach helped him build a routine and develop the confidence to participate fully in school life.

How this could work in practice:

The success of tailored interventions, such as the Momenta Connect programme, shows how structured, specialist support can transform the experience of SEND students within mainstream schools. Embedding this support directly in schools through SEND units would allow students to access the help they need without the delays of formal assessments or leaving their local environment.

The NAS has been running Cullum Centres within mainstream schools since 2015. These centres have proven extremely effective in supporting autistic students by integrating specialist provision into mainstream education, allowing students to thrive both academically and socially. However, the NAS expertise is focused solely on Autism rather than a wider range of needs.

3. Our Recommendation:

Building on the success of Callum Centres, the Government should roll out specialist SEND units within mainstream schools nationwide, providing flexible, integrated support for a range of SEND needs. These units would not only assist with SEMH and reintegration into education, but also support more complex clinical needs, including autism and mental health challenges.

By embedding specialist support in schools, these units can offer tailored interventions—such as therapeutic support and sensory regulation—while keeping students within their local school community, fostering a culture of real inclusion. This could also play a part in moving some Speech and Language Therapy services from the NHS and into schools, simplifying and destigmatising this critical intervention. Together, our ambition is that these changes can build confidence among parents engaging with the SEND system.

Partnering with expert SEND providers would ensure high-quality, scalable support that addresses both academic and emotional barriers, helping all SEND students thrive.

What we can learn from abroad:



Denmark

In Denmark all schools have access to a “pedagogical support team” that includes SEND coordinators, social workers, and educational psychologists.

This team works with classroom teachers to provide specialist advice, helping to develop strategies that meet specific needs while keeping students integrated within mainstream classes.



Italy

In Italy, legislation mandates the use of inclusive education practices within mainstream schools. Each SEND student has access to a support teacher and teaching assistants who provide extra help for students requiring support with mobility, communication, or academic tasks.

This model’s co-teaching structure encourages a shared responsibility for SEND students’ learning and ensures that each student receives personalised support without leaving the mainstream classroom.



Australia

Australia utilises a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). Starting with general classroom adjustments, MTSS includes universal strategies for accessible learning, followed by targeted interventions delivered in small groups. At the most intensive level, MTSS provides one-on-one support, often involving specialist staff.

This tiered system is guided by continuous progress monitoring, allowing teachers to adjust support levels dynamically.

4. Support pupils to re-integrate into mainstream schools and develop academic and personal development performance metrics which encourage schools to engage more pupils with SEND

Among the many issues arising from the overuse of EHCPs as the primary pathway to SEND support, an underdiscussed one is that EHCPs too often result in children or young people being permanently placed in specialist provision. Over time, too little thought has been given to how – when it is appropriate for their needs – children and young people with SEND can reintegrate back into mainstream settings where they can thrive socially and academically.

However, moving away from this dependency requires government to address the real challenges that deter students, families, and schools from attempting reintegration where this might otherwise be helpful. For students and families, there must be confidence that SEND needs will be met in mainstream settings to justify the effort and disruption of moving. But equally, schools need to know that they will have access to the funding and skills required to provide this support – and that they will not be unfairly downgraded in league tables for lower attendance or attainment among their SEND pupils.

A phased approach to reintegration, tailored to each student's readiness, can help SEND students transition smoothly into mainstream settings. Through gradual transition plans, students can join mainstream classes part-time, with regular check-ins and adjustments through a specialist unit, helping them to rebuild social connections and adapt to new academic settings with the support they need.

The reliance on summative assessments, such as GCSEs and Progress 8, disproportionately disadvantages SEND learners by ignoring their unique developmental trajectories. Instead, we advocate for assessment systems that recognise broader progress, including social and emotional skills, resilience, and independence.

4. Our Recommendation:

With effective changes to assessment and in-school support, formal policy interventions around reintegration can remain minimal, allowing flexibility to guide students' transitions back to mainstream settings as naturally and seamlessly as possible. To help schools support SEND students to reintegrate, these students should be counted separately in attendance and attainment statistics to avoid unfairly punishing schools for fostering a more inclusive culture. Furthermore:

- **Reduce the number of high-stakes exams and offer more rolling assessments and teacher-led evaluations to reflect individual progress over time.**
- **Integrate social and emotional skills, alongside academic outcomes, into progress measures to capture the full scope of SEND learners' growth.**
- **Leverage clinical tools, such as the Adaptive Behaviour Assessment System (ABAS), to complement academic assessments with measures of functional development.**

5. Strengthen local SEND Information, Advice & Support for Families

A major consequence of the crisis in SEND provision is that the parents or guardians of children and young people do not have complete confidence that their specific needs can be addressed in mainstream settings. Too often, teachers are unable to provide the support carers rightly expect, schools don't have adequate facilities, and specialist provision comes with long waiting lists – if you're even able to secure an EHCP.

The status quo has caused demand for EHCPs to skyrocket, undermined positive relationships between parents or carers and the school, and ultimately inhibited the joined-up support that young people with SEND need. Across the country, the breakdown in this critical relationship has led to parent groups organising and putting pressure on local authorities to step up provision.

The comprehensive set of recommendations we have set out in this report will go a long way to solving the crisis in the SEND system. But the trust of parents and carers must be won back if these reforms are to be given a chance by exhausted SEND families. Rebuilding this trust will be the key barometer of success of a reform package.

5. Our Recommendation:

To ensure parents and carers feel confident in their ability to secure the support their child needs, Government should expand the range of support provided by SENDIAS services to support families navigating the system, and provide the necessary funding to do so. This service should be free and able to answer questions throughout the SEND process, from pre-assessment to the transition into adulthood, helping families to navigate local SEND systems when issues arise.

At the same time, Government should make concerted efforts to simplify the system, setting out clear steps for assessment and intervention and limiting use of technical jargon where it is not necessary.

Reforms should also ensure that parents and carers are continually supported and engaged with as their child's needs evolve, recognising that families will most often understand their child's needs best.



Call to action

The need for change in the SEND system has never been more urgent. Reforms under the previous government unintentionally resulted in rising demand and constrained resources.

The EHCP's limitations have left many children and young people without access to the services they need, not only to thrive but, in many cases, just to cope.

Early, timely intervention provides a practical, sustainable approach to addressing these challenges, offering the potential to keep more students engaged in mainstream education, reduce long-term costs, and significantly improve outcomes for SEND students. Many of the recommendations outlined in this report would reinstate the more holistic system of timely intervention that was established under Labour before 2010.

Outcomes First Group stands ready to work with the government and policymakers to implement these five recommendations to build a better SEND system. We have already begun work to deliver a future where every young person, regardless of need, can succeed in education and beyond. What is needed now is concrete reforms and sustained commitment to change from government.



Get in touch

We are committed to collaborating with policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to build a better SEND system.

Together, we can ensure every young person has access to the support they need to succeed.





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