

POLICY ESSENTIALS: SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS & DISABILITIES





ABOUT

The County Councils Network (CCN) represents 39 county and unitary councils across England. We are a councillor-led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of our member councils and their communities to ensure they have a strong voice with national government, and to help deliver positive change for those authorities and the residents they serve.

The CCN aims to articulate the challenges and opportunities of its member councils, alongside their priorities, to the government and other key organisations. This is primarily done through original and impactful research across areas such as adult social care, children's services, housing and planning, and local government finance.

Building on our **Guide to CCN**, our updated series of **Policy Essentials** aims to give county and unitary councillors a short and concise overview of the most important policy issues facing their councils. This includes an overview of the key service responsibilities of councils; why it is a national advocacy priority for CCN; key developments in the national policy landscape; and CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities.

This Policy Essentials is focused on **Special Educational Needs & Disabilities**. For more information on our policy work in this area, contact:



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What role do councils play in SEND?

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) refers to a child or young person who has a learning difficulty and/or disability that means they need special health and education support.

There are two levels of support for SEND children:

- Children with higher-level needs hold an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This is a legal document outlining the educational, health, and social care needs of a child or young person with special educational needs or disabilities, aged 0 to 25. In 2024, 575,973 Children and young people had EHCPs and were supported in a variety of settings across mainstream and special providers in both the public and private sectors, funded by the council responsible for the child.
- SEND Support is provided mainly through schools for lower-level and expected time limited needs. Some 1.23m (13.6%) children receive SEND Support in England, in addition to those with EHCPs.

Support for children with SEND is resourced by the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) which funds all local schools and includes a specific High Needs Block for this purpose. The DSG is provided directly from central government and council tax cannot be used to fund school provision (and consequently SEND) without permission of the Secretary of State.

Additionally, councils can only allocate and manage DSG funding locally in conjunction with its Schools Forum (made up of local schools and other education providers).

Local authorities' statutory duties around the provision of support for children with SEND are set out in the [Children and Families Act 2014](#) and the [SEND Code of Practice](#).



What are the key issues facing CCN members in SEND?

- Over recent years, CCN has produced a range of sector leading research demonstrating the acute pressures within the SEND system, arguing that the system is not working for children, parents, schools or councils.
- **CCN's latest research, published in November 2025, showed that the number of children with EHCPs had risen to an all-time high of 638,000 this year**, and the number of young people in receipt of EHCPs is on course to reach almost 840,000 by the end of this Parliament – up by 32% in just four years.
- **Higher rates of identification of SEND are not leading to better educational attainment.** The percentage of GCSE students with EHCPs achieving Attainment 8 in 2025 is 14% – roughly the same as in 2019 and lower than the number achieving Attainment 8 in 2021. In addition, the percentage of 19-year-olds with EHCPs who attained Level 2 is 30% – a decline from 37% of young people a decade ago.
- **In seven of the last ten years, more children with EHCPs have been placed in special schools compared to mainstream settings.** A shortfall in special school places has led to a 165% rise in placements in independent special schools (34,000 children – a fifth of pupils in a special school), which cost, on average, nearly three times more than a state placement (£72,099 p.a. v £26,954 p.a.).
- This has had a major impact on local government finances. **In 2015, councils' SEND related expenditure was £4bn, but had reached £9.9bn by 2024/25.**
- **Almost all local authorities are affected by accumulated deficits** caused by this surge in demand for EHCP support. These deficits are currently being held off individual local authority finances through an Act of Parliament that created a 'Statutory Override' expiring in March 2028. In November 2025 the Office of Budget Responsibility estimated that deficits in the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) were projected to **reach £14bn nationwide by 2028/29.**



What is the national policy context for SEND?

It is almost universally acknowledged that the SEND system is broken. It does not work for children, parents, schools, or councils alike. Whilst reforms a decade ago that expanded eligibility for SEND support via EHCPs were done with the best of intentions, it has led to significant unfunded demand and an over-reliance on special school provision, with increasing waits for assessments, and little or no tangible improvements in outcomes for children.

In February 2026 the Government published a new Schools White Paper - *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* - which included the launch of a consultation document - *SEND reform: Putting Children and Young People First* - setting out proposals for widescale reform of the SEND system.

The overall aim of reform is for more SEND children's needs to be met within mainstream schools where outcomes for children remain higher than in specialist education. There will be a greater emphasis on identifying SEND needs earlier, including more support within the early years.

The process will be completed over a decade, in three phases:

- Phase One (2026-2028) will focus on 'building capacity' in the SEND system.
- Phase Two (2028-2029) will manage the 'transition' to the new system once legislation is expected to be passed.
- Phase Three (from 2029) will see the new system become operational.

Capacity-building will include investment over the three years of Phase One in new specialist school places (£3bn), a new 'Inclusive Mainstream Fund' for schools (£1.6bn), and training for staff (£200m). Local authorities will receive £1.8bn over the three years of Phase One to support the sector's role in establishing additional SEND 'experts at hand' support services for schools and for these to be employed in the new system.

The Government has also launched a new plan for SEND reform which includes 90% debt relief on accumulated deficits to March 2026 based on councils producing a 'SEND Reform Plan' for how they will operate effectively within a redesigned SEND system that is more focused on inclusion. It has also pledged to fund SEND centrally following the expiry of the Statutory Override in 2028.



What are CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities?

CCN's Business Plan 2026/27 sets out the network's priorities for SEND over the coming year. In relation to SEND, CCN will continue to be the sector's leading voice for reform, ensuring changes deliver better outcomes for children and long-term financial sustainability for councils. In particular, we will:

- **Influence and respond to national SEND reform proposals**, submitting a comprehensive CCN submission to consultations and forthcoming legislation, supported by external expertise.
- **Advocate for a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention**, using a newly created evidence base to demonstrate how earlier support can reduce escalation of need and demand for specialist provision.
- **Ensure SEND reform supports wider system sustainability**, particularly by creating better alignment with related cost pressures such as home-to-school transport and children's social care.
- **Address the high-needs funding crisis**, working with government to ensure fair implementation of deficit write-off arrangements, sustainable future funding, and supporting councils to develop robust SEND reform plans.
- **Shape the reform of the high-needs funding formula**, producing new research and evidence to demonstrate systemic underfunding in county and rural areas and influence future allocations.
- **Support member councils to help understand and embed SEND reform**, facilitating engagement within CCN networks, sharing insight, and helping councils respond to policy changes and develop local approaches.

[Read more about all our advocacy and research in the CCN Business Plan & Work Programme 2026/27.](#)





Reports

- [ISOS Partnership – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: How we got to crisis point \(2025\)](#)
- [Home to School Transport – How SEND Reform Can Make Services More Sustainable \(2026\)](#)
- [ISOS Partnership – Towards an effective and financially sustainable approach to SEND \(2024\)](#)

Press Releases



- [23 February 2026 – ‘Government unveils plans to reform the SEND system: CCN response](#)
- [14 November 2025 – ‘Councils warn SEND system faces total collapse without major reform to services’](#)
- [21 March 2025 – ‘Councils warn of financial catastrophe in 12 months time, with ‘unmanageable’ SEND deficits risking bankruptcy.’](#)