

Reaching my potential

The value of SEND provision demonstrated
through learners' stories

A report for the National Association of Independent
Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS)

Executive Summary

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About the National Association of Independent Schools & Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS)

This report has been commissioned by NASS, the national membership association for special schools outside local authority control. Its members include Non-Maintained Special Schools (NMSS), independent special schools (ISS), special academies (SA) and special free schools (SF). NASS has over 400 schools and organisations in its membership and is growing.

NASS works with its member schools to support, promote, and improve special school provision and to provide a voice for the sector via engagement with key sector stakeholders such as Government, Ofsted and local authorities (LA).

Scope and purpose of this report

This report explores the difference made to society if learners with SEND receive special educational provision that meets their needs. We have taken a qualitative story-based and person-centric approach to explore the impact of provision that meets needs.

NASS has commissioned this independent report to provide a refreshed evidence base on the value delivered to society by specialist provision. This report builds on and updates research published by NASS and Baker Tilly around a decade ago on the comparative costs and social return on investment (SROI) in specialist schools.^{1,2,3} It takes into account policy changes introduced by the Children and Families Act of 2014 and the wider context in which specialist provision is delivered today in Spring 2023.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are physical, emotional or learning needs that affect learners' ability to access education, and that restrict their ability to understand, retain and apply their learning. Broad areas in which learners can have special educational needs are: communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties, and sensory and/or physical needs.⁴

¹ Clifford, J. and Theobald, C., (2012), Summary of findings: Extension of the 2011 cost comparison methodology to a wider sample, National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools

² Clifford, J., Hamblin, J. and Theobald, C. (2011), Comparative Cost Review of Non-Maintained and Independent Special Schools with Local Authority Maintained Special Schools, NASS/Baker Tilly, Watford/York

³ Clifford, J. and Theobald, C. (2012) National Association of Independent and Non-Maintained Special Schools: Social Impact evaluation of Non-Maintained and Independent Special Schools using Social Return on Investment

⁴ DfE (2015), Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf

Provision that meets the needs of learners with SEND will generally seek to remove identified barriers to learning such as difficulty concentrating in certain environments or communication challenges. Special educational provision therefore encompasses not only educational instruction but also could include:

- Services relating to mental health
- Speech and language therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Occupational therapy
- Other therapies like music therapy, art therapy or hydro therapy
- Social care

Different sections of this report may be of interest to the following readers:

Policy makers in education, health and care and the public finances

- Sections 3 and 4 may be particularly informative for policy makers as they explore learners' needs and what provision can meet these needs effectively
- Policy makers could use this report's findings to answer some of the policy questions raised in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan published in March 2023
- Discussion in this report on how meeting learners' needs and those of their families can have wider societal implications in terms of public finances and economic productivity could also be of interest to this group (see Sections 4 and 5)

Practitioners in services that meet the needs of children and young people with special educational needs (e.g. schools or NHS services)

- Practitioners may be particularly interested in Sections 4 and 5. They could identify the archetype that is closest to learners in their settings, and use the findings to articulate the impact they could be making through their services
- Services could also use this report to inform discussions with their commissioners regarding the difference their provision can make to their learners. Although the report was commissioned by NASS, the report will provide insight into the needs and provision, regardless of the type of setting in which they are delivered

Commissioners of special educational or health services for learners with SEND and integrated care board (ICB) Chief Medical Officers

- The stories and needs of the learners explored in Section 4 and the implications for the wider public finances of meeting learners' needs in Section 5 may be a helpful illustration of the difference commissioners can make when learners are placed in the right setting

Parents of children with SEND

- Parents may be interested in Sections 3 and 4. These explore the types of provision that meet learners' needs; the stories of the learners and their families may resonate with families who are on the same or similar journeys

A summary of our approach

This research used a mixed-methods approach – meaning quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed to evidence the value created by provision that meets learners' needs. The overall approach and methods are summarised in Figure 1 and described in further detail below and in Appendix 1.



Figure 1: High level research approach

Specialist provision that achieves change in the lives of learners with SEND

This report focuses on learners with the most complex SEND; these are the learners who benefit most from tailored and specialist provision. However, the key principle underlying this work – that having needs met makes a difference to outcomes for learners, those around them and society more broadly – also applies to learners with less pronounced SEND.

Our research found that provision that meets needs enables learners to lead a better quality of life, whether that means having more agency, being less dependent on public services, having the ability to engage in their communities, or having the potential to work or participate in voluntary work. It should also improve the lives of family members and carers, by reducing the learners' dependency on them and any subsequent emotional, financial, and physical toll.

Our research found that there are two key features of provision that meets needs (summarised in Figure 2):

- Provision must be tailored to an individual learner's needs and their own potential, and must be responsive to their changing needs
- Provision that is holistic and evidence-based, with teaching and other support required delivered in an integrated way. It must also be delivered in a setting that supports the pupil to engage in learning (for example, with a suitable atmosphere and appropriate levels of stimulus)



Figure 2: Key features of provision that meets learners' needs

This approach to provision could be achieved in a range of settings, from mainstream schools to independent special schools. However, to meet needs these settings would require flexibility, funding, and combination of expert staff and as well as all other staff with a good knowledge of SEND. They would also need to be able to deliver the appropriate levels of stimulus and atmosphere required for some learners. If some settings are not able to adapt to the needs of learners in these ways, then they may only partially meet learners' needs, or will not be able to meet their needs at all. This will be the case for most schools – where, by necessity, they need to focus on meeting the needs of most of their pupils rather than focusing on a small number of the most complex pupils.

Key findings from learner (archetype) journey analysis

In this research we developed profiles of eight 'typical' learners with complex SEND who all have education, health and care (EHC) plans and benefit from special educational provision. They are composites of learners with SEND whose needs and experiences are typical of pupils in special schools. These archetypes were designed to represent and capture the stories of a large proportion of the children with EHC plans in England with the most complex needs.

These archetypes were developed through research activities with NASS member special schools. The impacts of these learners having their needs met were informed by this primary research, as well as by secondary sources. For a summary of our learners and their stories see Table 1.

Drawing on the findings from our research, we developed a model which values the difference in outcomes when learners' needs are met compared to when their needs are only partially met, as well as the incremental cost of

the provision that meets their needs. This analysis has been used to demonstrate the net value to learners with SEND and society of provision that meets needs. This analysis was undertaken for five of the eight archetypes (highlighted in blue in Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of archetypes – their needs and outcomes

Name	Needs	Difference that provision that meets their needs makes
Tim	Has autism and communication challenges	He learns to communicate, to engage effectively socially, gains qualifications and subsequently takes up paid work.
Ade	Has a combination of autism, anxiety and physical health needs	He is able to develop key life skills like preparing his own meals, and is able to volunteer later in life.
Sarah	Has SEMH needs and has experienced significant abuse	She is able to form and maintain positive relationships. She gains a qualification, and she goes on to part-time employment upon leaving school.
Olivia	Has cerebral palsy and has communication challenges	She learns to communicate her needs and can direct her care, for example, she can ask for those supporting her to move her position in her chair. After leaving school she is able to move into a supported living setting, reducing caring demands on her family. Among the archetypes whose stories have been explored quantitatively, the net benefit for Olivia is smallest. However, this does not include the quality and length of life benefits of meeting her needs which could be significant. The value calculated here simply reflects that, among the archetypes, Olivia will require the highest amount of lifetime support which is at higher cost. Even those with highly complex needs and associated costs there is a significant amount of benefit to her, her family and society of meeting her needs.
Charlie	Has a sensory impairment and communication challenges	She is able to leave school with the confidence to build friendships and to engage socially. She is able to gain qualifications and employment later in life.
Abichal	Has SEMH needs related to past trauma, and has dyslexia and physical health needs	His behaviours that challenge reduce over time and his mother is able to return to work.
Frank	Has a degenerative nervous system disorder and experiences mental health challenges	Being able to express his needs improves his mental health, and having therapy support and health services on the school site improves the quality of his day-to-day life.

Name	Needs	Difference that provision that meets their needs makes
Fred	Has profound speech, language and communication needs, and is behind his chronological age academically	He is able to develop communication and other key skills. Getting the right support means that his parents are able to have more secure employment, improving the family's financial security.

Findings from this quantitative analysis indicated that the average net value across their lifetime for a learner with complex SEND as a result of having their needs met could be at least £380k. This represents benefits to learners themselves, their families, government departments and the wider economy in England. This value, broken down by stakeholder, is shown in Figure 3.

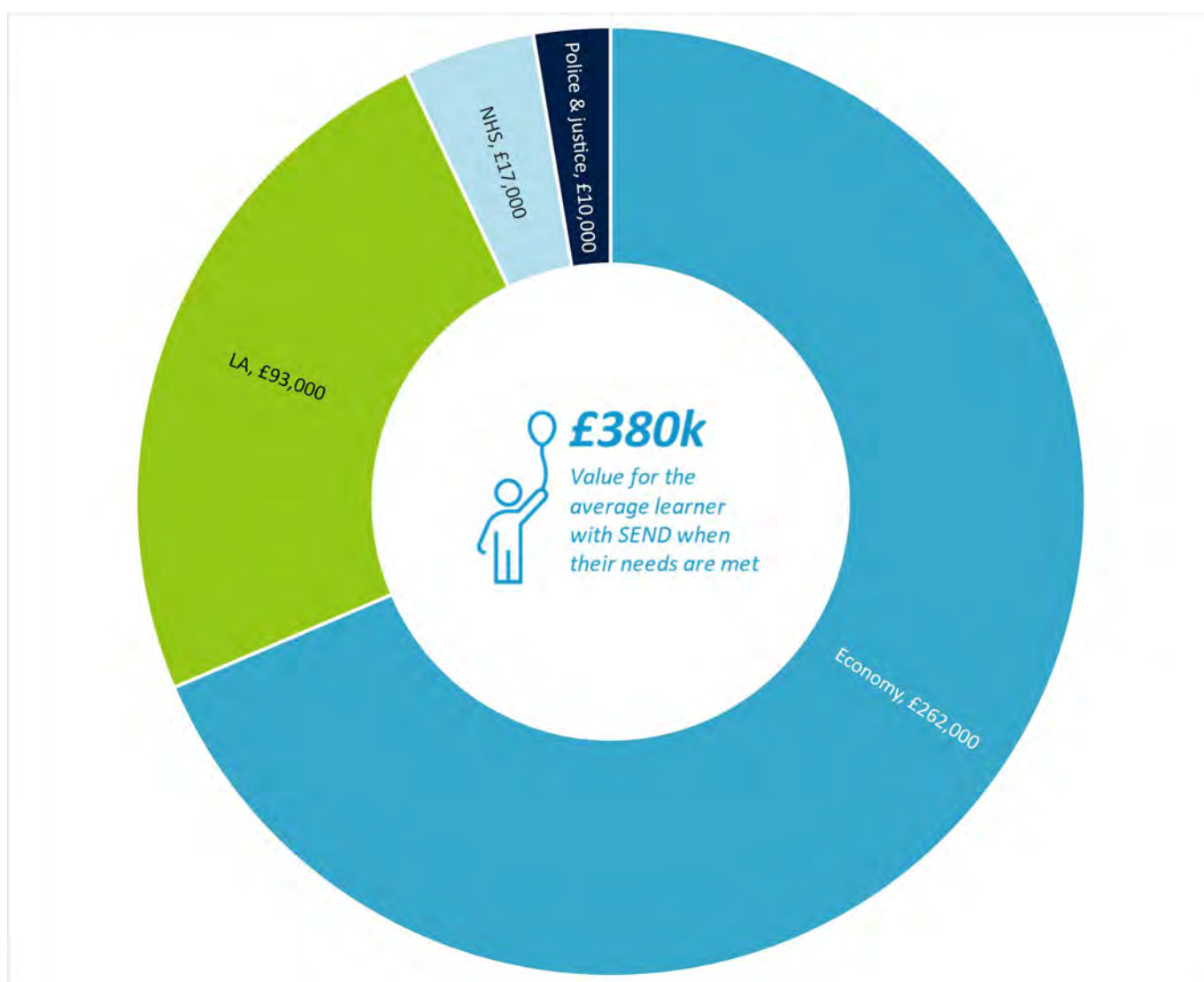


Figure 3: Value generated by meeting the learners' needs – average across five archetypes, broken down by stakeholder

Key thematic findings

Findings from our research have implications for policy, practice and delivery of special educational provision. Below we detail key thematic findings and which part of the report these are drawn from.

Finding 1: Each learner has their own unique potential, and targeted outcomes for each learner need to reflect this

Appropriate target outcomes need to be set for each learner according to their own potential. The 2014 reforms marked a move to a SEND system that had at its core an ambition for learners with SEND to achieve their potential. The SEND and AP Improvement Plan seems to have scaled back ambitions for learners with SEND from 'the best possible outcomes' to 'good' outcomes that are consistent with provision that is 'financially sustainable'.

Furthermore, the Plan uses rates of educational attainment in English and Maths for learners without identified SEND as a benchmark for learners with SEND [See Section 2]. Many learners with SEND will never be able to achieve these benchmarks (some learners with SEND will not have the cognitive ability to engage with mathematics or English at the level of peers without identified SEND) and, as such, these are flawed measures.

Given this research's findings that every learner with SEND has their own unique potential It is concerning to note that this appears to suggest that benchmarks for learners with no identified SEND are appropriate as measures of success for attainment of learners with SEND.

Finding 2: Each learner has a unique set of needs, and provision that works for one learner may not meet the needs of another

Learners with SEND have different learning needs, different strengths and different levels of potential. As such, provision that meets needs will differ from individual to individual. Standardisation of educational provision according to perceived groups of needs may limit chances for children with the most complex needs to realise their potential [see Section 3].

Finding 3: Family stability and mental health of learners and those around them suffer when learners' needs are not fully met

The potential for family breakdown as a consequence of learners not being in settings that meet their needs was a common theme identified across our research [see Section 4]. While the EHC assessment process does encourage consideration of family support needs, these are not prompted in the EHC form itself [see Section 2]. When family breakdown occurs, it compromises one of the key sources of ongoing support for the young person, and places further burden on funded services.

Finding 4: While in the short term provision that meets needs may be more costly, it is likely to have benefits in the future by reducing pressure on wider public budgets

While in the short-term provision that meets needs may be more costly to the high needs budget, it may reduce costs in other areas of public spending. For example, if a young person with autism is able to leave school with the ability to communicate effectively and to regulate their behaviour, they may be less dependent on public services later in life and may be more able to take up paid employment [see Section 4].

Finding 5: A key driver of system cost may be that learners are not being placed in the 'right place, right time' with the 'right support'

Research participants indicated that many of the children in their schools did not arrive in those settings early enough [see Appendix 2]. As a consequence, their needs are elevated and their development delayed significantly; this ultimately requires a higher investment in special educational provision to address their needs. Further research and exploration is required to understand why learners may experience a number of placements before the right one is found: is it driven by constraints on high needs budgets? Is it a lack of evidence of what works for learners with different needs? Is it that EHC assessments are not effective enough in identifying needs?

Finding 6: There is not enough capacity in the system to meet the needs of learners in spite of the increase in the high needs budget

The number of learners with EHC plans has increased by 50% between 2015/16 and 2021/22 (to 355,566 from 236,806). The Government has increased the high needs budget in response; in the three years to 2022-23 it increased by £2.5 billion to £9.1 billion 2022-23, and will reach £10.1 billion in 2023-24. In spite of these increases, many special schools are at or are close to capacity, and funding per place has fallen in real terms. Outside of these figures there may be a hidden group, probably of 14,600 or so, learners who are eligible for EHCPs but are being educated at home [see Appendix 2, section *Is there enough capacity in special schools to meet demand?*]. The financial costs of the 2014 Children and Families Act were estimated prior to its introduction, but did not fully anticipate the increased costs of meeting needs of those aged up to 25 years with SEND [see Section 2].

Finding 7: Special educational provision often encompasses delivery of some health care but this may not be funded appropriately, and the right oversight may not be in place

Per the SEND Code of Practice, special educational provision encompasses providing health⁵ and care services where they support the education of a child. These services may be commissioned and funded through the high needs block rather than care and health budgets. Participants in this research indicated that special schools are expected to provide mental health services without specific funding, or recognition of the services they are

⁵ But not nursing services.

providing. Some schools participating in the research have added therapy to their provision to meet the needs of learners without asking for additional fees from the local authority [see Section 2].


There are a number of implications arising from this lack of joined-up commissioning and from schools delivering health services funded by the education budget:

- Staff delivering mental health or nursing services might not have the appropriate oversight, leading to risks to learners in those settings
- There is no clear framework by which to evaluate outcomes and impacts for these types of support delivered in these schools

Recommendations

Based on our quantitative and thematic findings, we propose a series of recommendations:

- A. SEND policy and regulatory changes should be driven by evidence-based analysis of the current and future impact of SEND provision. Any future statutory changes should have their social impacts and financial implications fully assessed. All stakeholders in the SEND system have a role to play in demonstrating impact in its widest sense – financial and social. High quality data gathered at school-level needs to feed through to local authority commissioners and beyond to national policy makers, and to be believed and acted upon.
- B. Benchmarking of provision needs to be approached with care. Young people with special needs must be afforded the same aspiration as the general population – to be the best they can be. The SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan from the Department for Education (March 23) sets aspirations of ‘good outcomes’ for these young people, but these must not be ‘good’ in the context of the aspirations and approaches of non-SEND provision but must support the reasonable and tailored aspirations of the individual young person, whether with SEND or not. Setting targets and measuring impact should come from the front line of delivery, so standards should be set from a deep understanding of what is happening and aspirational for young people and their teachers.
- C. In preparation for policy changes, schools need to keep good records of provision for each individual learner, learners’ destinations on leaving school and what differences their provision has made for learners. Families can be involved and help with this, reflecting the importance of their role as recognised in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan. This will help improve the evidence base, and will support schools’ discussions with commissioners, as well as inform any future research into longer-term outcomes for people with SEND and the specialist provision they received at school age.

- D. Key current local authority intervention programmes should be closely monitored and evaluated, and where they are having a negative impact be reconsidered. For example, the potential impact on learners in local authority areas subject to Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value in SEND programmes should be tracked. This would provide evidence that can be used to inform regulatory impact assessments on the social and financial costs and benefits of any future changes.
 - E. We need further research to determine how to identify the right provision in the right setting at the right time for learners. Ultimately, we need to build on this research to better understand the key factors behind successful placements. Schools and commissioners should gather evidence from and seek to learn lessons from each learner's individual educational journey, particularly when it involves multiple school placements. Collectively, we also need to better understand what influences parents' and carers' school choice decisions, and what factors drive local authorities' decisions regarding where learners receive special educational provision.
 - F. We welcome the planned work on Education Health and Care Plan formats set out in the SEND and AP improvement Plan. The findings of this research indicate that value is often added through elements of provision which are not routinely captured in EHCPs currently, e.g. emotional wellbeing. We would like to ensure that future EHCP templates and guidance capture broad and aspirational outcomes for children and their families, as initially envisaged in the 2014 reforms. All stakeholders within the SEND system have a role to play in this.
 - G. Investments made in provision for individual children make returns beyond that individual child over a considerable period of time. Within the SEND change programme, we would like to see scope to explore models which acknowledge and support this. This includes the planned work to secure greater Health involvement in SEND provision but could meaningfully go beyond this to consider whole-place/whole lifetime budgets for those with the most complex needs to move beyond the 'silos' of individual agency budgets. This, in turn, will require a dedicated focus on commissioning for children with the most complex needs and an acknowledgement that this may need local, regional and national focus.
 - H. Our findings consistently demonstrate the particular value that good mental health support offered by special schools delivers. To meet the needs of their learners many schools may deliver services without appropriate funding, guidance or oversight (for example nursing services or mental health therapies). We welcome the intent in the SEND and AP Improvement Plan to clarify the role of Health provision within SEND provision. We would like to see a specific focus on mental health within this. Schools should record systematically the care and mental health support they provide to learners, and which interventions are effective. Findings should be used to inform government guidance to support the wider sector in delivery of these services. We would like to see the suggested recommendation from the National Safeguarding Panel in phase 2 of the Hesley report to consider joint Ofsted/CQC inspection of provision explored further as part of this.
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