

A manifesto for special schools

# REMOVING BARRIERS

To build a better SEND system



# NASS

National Association  
of Special Schools

[nassschools.org.uk/manifesto2024](https://nassschools.org.uk/manifesto2024)

#NASSManifesto2024

We believe that to protect children and young people with SEND, now and into the future, we need urgent action during the first 100 days of a new government to remove barriers and build a better SEND system.

Regardless of which party emerges victorious on election day, they must heed the urgent call to take swift action and build a modern SEND system founded on partnership and co-production.

It is time for children and young people with SEND to have their needs placed at the centre of policy.



Over 1.5 million pupils in England have special educational needs (SEN)<sup>1</sup>

## WE CALL ON THE NEW GOVERNMENT TO TAKE THESE SIX ACTIONS WITHIN ITS FIRST 100 DAYS IN OFFICE:



**ESTABLISH** a Cabinet Level Minister for Children, Young People and SEND to ensure that the voices of all children and young people, including those with SEND, are heard across government.



**COMMIT** to uphold the statement within the Children and Families Act 2014 that stipulates that the choice of placement should enable the achievement of the 'best possible' outcomes for children and young People with SEND.



**COMMISSION** a government strategic review of special schools.



**DEVELOP** an education workforce strategy that values people and skills and provides opportunities to share knowledge and expertise across the education sector.



**CONDUCT** research into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people with SEND and establish a strong evidence base identifying best practice and interventions that have the greatest impact.



**PAUSE** financial interventions with local authorities that risk them breaking SEND law.



## **ESTABLISH a Cabinet Level Minister for Children, Young People and SEND to ensure that the voices of all children and young people, including those with SEND, are heard across government.**

We are concerned that the voices of all children and young people, but especially those with SEND, are increasingly dismissed and ignored when key policy decisions are made that affect their wellbeing and future.

A step-change is needed in how government prioritises, invests and makes decisions that shape the lives of children, young people and their families. For children and young people with SEND especially, government policies wield the greatest impact on their life experiences, yet unfortunately they have the weakest voices in government.

**NASS is proud to be one of the 200 partner organisations supporting the Children at the Table campaign - a children's charity coalition that is campaigning to place children at the heart of the next government.**

### **Want to find out more?**

Read our blog: **Can we get a stronger voice for SEND in government, please?**

[nasschools.org.uk/strongerSENDvoice](https://nasschools.org.uk/strongerSENDvoice)

Parliament has already advocated for a better voice for children and young people, and especially those with SEND. The government National Disability Strategy<sup>2</sup> provided a commitment to place disabled people at the heart of government policy making and service delivery. In December 2022, a House of Lords select committee report recommended that children needed a strong voice at the highest level of government.<sup>3</sup>

We want to see these commitments and recommendations become reality. It is why we are asking the new government, within its first 100 days in power, to establish a cabinet level Minister for Children, Young People and SEND.





**COMMIT to uphold the statement within the Children and Families Act 2014 that stipulates that the choice of placement should enable the achievement of the 'best possible' outcomes for children and young people with SEND.**

Many across the SEND sector are concerned that the SEND and AP Improvement Plan<sup>4</sup> has shifted the narrative away from stipulating that the choice of placement should enable the achievement of the 'best possible' outcomes to a seemingly scaled-back set of ambitions for learners with SEND to achieve 'good' outcomes.

The growing emphasis on 'good enough', 'minimum standard' and 'ordinarily available provision' is troubling. While learners without SEND are still promised 'the best possible education,' aiming only for 'good outcomes' for those with SEND risks creating inequality.<sup>5</sup>

We are worried that the current tone set by central government is fostering increased negative attitudes



**Want to find out more?**

Read our blog: **SEND and AP Improvement Plan**

[nasschools.org.uk/SENDplanreview](https://nasschools.org.uk/SENDplanreview)

towards children and young people with SEND and their families. Unfortunately, this is also being perpetuated by communities and local decision makers.

It's important that children and young people with SEND should not be seen as a burden but recognised and valued as important members of our society. It is why we are asking the new government, within its first 100 days in power, to commit to uphold the statement within the Children and Families Act 2014<sup>6</sup> that stipulates that the choice of placement should enable the achievement of the 'best possible' outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

**Our 2023 commissioned report Reaching My Potential concluded that meeting a child's special educational needs returns social and financial value to individuals, their families and the public purse of around £350k.**





## COMMISSION a government strategic review of special schools.

We believe that special schools in the maintained, non-maintained and independent sectors must form a key and important part of the overall provision available for children and young people with special educational needs. We acknowledge, however, that a review of the role of special schools within the wider education system is overdue.

It is why we are asking the new government, within its first 100 days in power, to commission a government strategic review of special schools. Past governments have proposed numerous strategies aimed at addressing the growing demand such as adding new state provision and diminishing the reliance on non-maintained and independent specialist provision. However, as we highlighted in our 2024 thought paper **Working Stronger Together**,<sup>7</sup> we believe a mixed-market system will offer

**There are nearly 9,000 children and young people with SEND without a school place that meets their needs and therefore without education. NASS supports the Let Us Learn Too campaign, demanding government action to guarantee every child and young person has a school place suitable to their needs.**

the best approach to provision for learners, as well as ensuring a sufficient number of placements in the short, medium and long term.

A strategic review is essential to envision evidence-based scenarios for a modern SEND system. Driven by experts, the review should prioritise provision from a child and young person-centred basis rather than being cost cutting and target driven.

We would urge that the review explores the vital role that special schools play in the creation and sharing of new knowledge and pedagogy. We need to develop stronger pathways to enable special schools to offer outreach support and help establish national and regional sources of expertise to facilitate training and inclusion for mainstream colleagues. The review should also consider opportunities for investigating the effective use of dual placements.



**Want to find out more?**

Read our blog: **Setting a vision for the future role of special schools**  
[nasschools.org.uk/settingvision](https://nasschools.org.uk/settingvision)



## DEVELOP an education workforce strategy that values people and skills and provides opportunities to share knowledge and expertise across the education sector.

A highly skilled and professional workforce is integral to an effective education system. It should feel valued and understood, and have a clear process for identifying, planning and delivering the expertise needed.

Our discussions with NASS member schools reflect the experience from across the wider special school sector,<sup>8</sup> whereby for every 1,000 teacher posts in special schools, 13 were filled by a temporary staff member (1.3%) and six in every 1,000 teacher posts within the specialist sector were vacant.<sup>9</sup> Some of our members recently highlighted that around 30% of their staffing budgets were having to be used on agency staff.

However, despite widespread calls for action within the sector, both the Stable Homes, Built on Love report<sup>10</sup> and SEND and AP Improvement Plan<sup>11</sup> failed to grasp the pressing workforce crisis in education and children's care. They failed to tackle the systemic barriers hindering progress. It is why we are asking the new government,

8.8% of teachers left the profession in 2021/22<sup>12</sup> with over a third leaving within six years of qualifying



### Want to find out more?

Read our blog: **Special schools need special people**  
[nasschools.org.uk/specialpeople](https://nasschools.org.uk/specialpeople)

within its first 100 days in power, to commit to working with key stakeholders to develop an ambitious and sustainable workforce strategy. We want it to outline how the government plans to support the education sector to remove barriers to attracting, developing, retaining and supporting the wider teaching workforce, as well as all other special school roles.

In developing a robust workforce strategy, we urge the new government to collaborate with the sector to understand the challenges and opportunities within the wider education workforce and provision patterns nationwide. The strategy must identify the skills, training, qualifications and support needed to improve the capability and capacity of leaders, teachers, care and support staff. It should also consider the esteem in which they are held.

Fundamentally, developing a strong and valued workforce is the cornerstone to building a better SEND system.

**We've added our voice to a coalition of organisations as part of the SEND National Consortium (SEC) manifesto 2024, which also seeks a commitment from the next government to tackle the SEND workforce crisis.**

**NASS supports the #SENDinthespecialist coalition, which is advocating for investment and strategic planning for the specialist workforce that children and young people and their families need.**



**CONDUCT** research into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people with SEND, to establish a strong evidence base identifying best practice and interventions that have the greatest impact.

NASS is advocating for urgent action to allow proper investment in evidence-based and informed interventions that effectively support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people with SEND.

Children and young people face significant challenges in accessing the support they need. Long waiting-times, high thresholds and fragmented services are the norm across the country. Shockingly, around 75% of young people experiencing a mental health problem are forced to wait so long that their condition gets worse, or they are unable to access any treatment at all.<sup>13</sup> Often, schools must bridge the gap by providing in-house support.

Our 2023 commissioned report **Reaching My Potential**<sup>14</sup> highlighted the importance of addressing mental health

needs and the positive impact support has on outcomes. However, without a national framework setting out the most effective interventions for different children or standards of delivery, it is a patchwork of approaches and services constantly under threat of budget cuts. The limited accountability across health and education both locally and nationally also hinders any real opportunity for impactful collaboration and service planning.

It is why we are asking the new government, within its first 100 days in power, to conduct research into the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people with SEND, to establish a strong evidence base identifying best practice and interventions that have the greatest impact.

**Nearly 40% of children with SEND had an overall wellbeing rating indicating possible depression, twice as many as those without SEND.**<sup>15</sup>



**NASS, is a proud member of the Children and Young People Mental Health Coalition.**

**Want to find out more?**

Read our blog: **Tackling mental health challenges & SEND**

[nassschools.org.uk/SENDmentalhealth](https://nassschools.org.uk/SENDmentalhealth)



## PAUSE financial interventions with local authorities that risk them breaking SEND law.

The increasingly challenging financial interventions that have been introduced over the last few years have had a significant impact on the ability of local authorities (LAs) to meet their statutory obligations.

We are concerned that initiatives such as the Safety Valve (SV) programme and Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme have given rise to LAs becoming focused on chasing arbitrary financial targets to the detriment of meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.

During 2024, we are aware of increasing numbers of LAs who have been making questionable policy decisions that at the very least are not in the spirit of SEND law and guidance, but also worryingly, breach legal boundaries.

These decisions are often justified under programme banners, but significant repercussions of those decisions are increasingly evident, such as children being removed from established special school placements in the name of reducing costs.

Adding to our concern is the lack of transparency in terms of the purpose, scope and process of these financial interventions and their success measures. We urge the next government to seek assurances that the programmes are not encouraging unlawful decision-making by local authorities. A comprehensive review is needed to assess the impact of these programmes on the rights of children and young people with SEND.

It is why we are asking the new government, within its first 100 days in power, to pause financial interventions with local authorities that risk them breaking SEND law.



### Want to find out more?

Read our blog: **Under pressure - a call to pause financial interventions with local authorities**  
[nassschools.org.uk/underpressure](https://nassschools.org.uk/underpressure)



We are a membership organisation representing special schools in England and Wales providing support, advice, information, events, training, and a strong voice for special schools outside local authority control.

NASS currently has around 400 schools and organisations in membership, which include Non-Maintained Special Schools, Independent Special Schools and Special Academies.

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.

## References

- 1 [Department for Education \(2023\). \*Special Educational Needs in England\*](#)
- 2 [Cp \(2021\). \*National Disability Strategy\*](#)
- 3 [House of Lords Children and Families Act 2014 Committee. \(2021-2022\) \*Children and Families Act 2014: A failure of implementation\*](#)
- 4 [Department for Education \(2023\). \*SEND and alternative provision improvement plan\*](#)
- 5 [The Education Hub \(2022\), \*How we're raising standards in our schools and colleges – what the Schools White Paper means for you\*](#)
- 6 [Children and Families Act 2014](#)
- 7 [NASS \(2024\) \*Working Stronger Together: Exploring the current and possible future relationship between the state and Independent Special Schools\*](#)
- 8 [Walker, A. \(2023\). \*Special schools bear brunt of recruitment crisis\*. \[schoolsweek.co.uk\]\(http://schoolsweek.co.uk\)](#)
- 9 [GOV.UK \(2023\). \*School Workforce in England, Reporting Year 2022\*](#)
- 10 [DfE \(2023\) \*Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love\* Government Consultation Response CP 933](#)
- 11 [DfE \(2023\) \*Special Educational Needs and Disabilities \(SEND\) and Alternative Provision \(AP\) Improvement Plan\*](#)
- 12 [GOV.UK \(2023\). \*School Workforce in England, Reporting Year 2022\*](#)
- 13 [Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition \(2023\). \*Children and young people's mental health: An independent review into policy success and challenges over the last decade\* | \[Local Government Association\]\(#\)](#)
- 14 [Obe, J., Hutchison, E., Kemp, J. and Cooke, C. \(2023\). \*Reaching my potential A report for NASS\*](#)
- 15 [Children's Commissioner for England. \(2024\) \*The Big Ambition\*](#)

## Supporting our manifesto

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 [nassschools.org.uk/manifesto2024](https://nassschools.org.uk/manifesto2024)

If you would like to discuss our manifesto, please contact Mari Davis, NASS Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer.

### Help us bring about positive change

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