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of Special Schools

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SEND Reforms Consultation 2026

What role does Government see for special schools?

Introduction

This paper forms part of NASS’s formal response to the consultation ‘SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First. We note that there are no specific questions relating to special schools within the consultation. This paper covers aspects of the proposed reforms from a special school’s perspective and should be considered alongside NASS’s overall response and accompanying issue-specific papers.

The National Association of Special Schools is a membership organisation for all types of special schools in England and Wales. NASS has almost 500 member schools and organisations. This paper has been informed by consultation events held with both NASS members and non-member special schools.

Inclusion is more than place-based

NASS understands and supports the Government’s vision of making mainstream schools more welcoming for a wider range of learners with SEND. It is right that much of the focus is on supporting mainstream schools to improve the offer and experience for learners with SEND. However, inclusion is about more than *where* a child receives their education. There is no recognition in the document of the role that special schools play in inclusion through providing education that meets the needs of each child and through fostering a sense of belonging. Special schools are experts at building strong, inclusive cultures and we were disappointed to see little recognition of this, either in valuing special schools in their own right, or as agents of cultural change in mainstream education.

‘Valued’ but ‘less than’?

Government appears to be working on the assumption that there are children currently educated in special schools who could, and should, be educated in mainstream schools with support. The evidence base for this is unclear. Whilst we accept that it is likely to be the case for some children, especially if identification and support happen earlier, we have seen little analysis setting out the expected border between mainstream and specialist. Additionally, Government implies that there may be a further boundary between specialist and ‘highly specialist’. Phrases such as ‘most complex’ are used throughout the document without a clear definition of what this means in practice. The assumption is that specialist settings will work with this ‘most complex’ group but within this, there is no clear sense of when that specialist support would be expected to be provided by a specialist base in a mainstream setting and when it would be expected to be provided by a special school. There is no clear definition of which needs might sit outside of some special schools’ expertise and require a higher level of specialism. We believe this should be modelled prior to the reforms being made.

On a number of occasions, the Secretary of State has made the assertion that children with SEND do better in mainstream schools than special schools. This is also reflected in the SEND Reforms consultation document, which states as its evidence for this that children with SEND in mainstream, on average, perform half a GCSE grade higher than children with SEND in special schools. The DfE research team responsible for this evidence issued several caveats in their report, including guarding against simple assumptions that children with SEND in mainstream ‘do better’ than those in special schools. The report correctly identifies that the expectation is that children in special schools will have more complex needs than those in mainstream and only 22% of children with EHCPs actually sit GCSEs.

This assertion that children with SEND do more poorly in special schools has been used as the basis for a policy focused on including more children with SEND in mainstream schools. Whilst we support wider inclusion, we do not believe that this should be at the expense of specialist provision – especially where this is based on very limited evidence. We have been concerned to note that ahead of this consultation closing, Government has issued instructions to Local Authorities on how to ensure that they meet the conditions for having 90% of their High Needs funding debts ‘written off’. Within these, they note that Local Authorities should be moving away from investing in special school provision and moving towards investing in specialist bases within mainstream schools. We believe that this is

precipitant and that changes are being made to the structure of SEND placements without clear evidence of cultural capital and expertise being in sufficient supply within the system, and mainstream schools in particular, to meet the needs of children who require a complex service response.

We call on Government to produce a clear Theory of Change document in their response to this consultation, setting out how many children and young people they expect to be diverted away from special school provision, at what point and when there will be sufficient, appropriately resourced and staffed bases in mainstream schools to meet their needs. If, as we suspect, this may require a sustained, or even expanded, number of placements in special schools in the short to medium term, this should be facilitated in policy and funding. The specific role and nature of low-incidence, highly specialised provision should be clearly defined, so that special schools have a clear sense of their position within the new system.

Specialist Provision Packages – an opportunity for more equitable funding but a risk to specialism

The shift away from highly individualised support towards category-based support is a major change for special schools. We recognise that this model may work for special schools that meet multiple categories of need, who can identify how specific packages map onto their cohort. We are less convinced that the SPPs, as currently drafted, will work for schools that currently support very specific cohorts, e.g. young people with autism or Deaf children. Many such young people benefit from highly specialist support because they have a wide range of needs which overlap and often require very bespoke packages of support. How SPPs will deliver for this cohort is currently uncertain.

We recognise that there is currently huge variability in how specialist provision is funded. In some cases, there is ostensible inequity, for example when top-up rates for children with very similar levels of need are funded in one area at almost three times the rate of a special school in a neighbouring authority. We support the role that Specialist Provision Packages might play in determining more equitable funding in these cases.

In other cases, the difference in funding relates to schools serving cohorts that might appear similar on paper but are different in practice – often due to the impact that life and service-response experiences have had on them, for example lengthy periods of being out of school. Beyond that, the type of

school makes a difference to the cost of placements and the central and local funding available to the school. Some schools' staffing costs are primarily teaching and learning-related, whilst others directly employ therapists, care staff and other specialists.

We recognise the intent that banded funding should be flexible enough to take account of such variations, but we believe that attaching funding to the Specialist Provision Packages will require specialist financial skills and a commitment to keep under very regular, i.e. at least annual, review. We seek reassurance from Government that funding amounts will be grounded in the cost of providing necessary services to each child, rather than introducing an arbitrary price cap.

We note that Health services have a role in SPPs in both assessing need and delivering services. We do not have faith that there is sufficient capacity within ICBs to meet current demand. If, as suggested, ICBs may take over responsibility for providing a number of health services, e.g. mental health care, which is currently directly provided by schools, we believe there will be a very significant shortfall between the demand and supply of services.

It is unclear at this point how health services will be funded within SPPs, i.e. will schools be paid a single fee from DfE, who will then recoup the health element, or will schools be responsible for securing health funding. We would caution strongly against the latter as this is likely to create significant cash-flow difficulties – especially for schools that work across several ICBs.

Finally, in this section, we call on Government to clarify its vision for the role of specialism within the SEND system. Currently, some special schools work with children with a very wide range of needs, whilst others specialise in one category of needs, such as autism, social, emotional and mental health needs, Deafness and complex medical needs. This is particularly, but by no means exclusively, true of the Non-Maintained and Independent Special School sectors. We believe that the 'refreshed' SEND Code of Practice and the Specialist Provision Packages represent a potential risk to special schools currently with condition-specific designations. We would like a commitment from Government to work closely with special schools to build and shape a vision for specialism in the new system to ensure that valuable expertise is not lost from the sector simply as a result of how SPPs set out and fund provision. This risks excluding effective elements of the school's current offer.

The future role of special schools currently designated as Social Emotional and Mental Health Specialists

It is notable that the ‘refreshed’ SEND Code of Practice removes the category of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) Needs introduced in the 2014 reforms. This is a very significant change and Government has given no clear rationale for making it, nor a steer on what this will mean in practice for special schools currently designated as supporting children with SEMH.

Over 350000 learners are currently identified as having a mental health-related educational need. Since 2014, schools have had to work hard to define mental health as an educational need and to develop responses that use school-based mental health therapists to integrate therapeutic and trauma-informed responses in the classroom. The proposed reforms leave the future of this work uncertain.

Within the draft SPPs, mental health needs are mentioned but are qualified as requiring assessment by ‘health’. How ‘health’ will be defined for these purposes is unclear, i.e. does it need to be someone employed by the local ICB or someone with a health professionals’ registration?

The conceptual uncertainties around mental health are evident in the draft ‘internalising’ and ‘externalising’ SPPs. It is unclear why trauma-informed responses would be mentioned in the ‘internalising’ SPP but not the ‘externalising’. Counselling is mentioned in both packages but is unlikely to be a viable option for children with acute needs or chronic attachment disorders who could struggle to be in a relationship with a counsellor.

It is our understanding that Government is seeking to establish a clearer demarcation between tasks that are seen as being ‘educational tasks’, such as emotional regulation for learning and tasks which are ‘health tasks’ such as treatment for diagnosed mental health conditions. The proposal is that health services should meet health needs. Beyond the capacity issues already mentioned, we believe that over the past 12 years, the best SEMH schools have developed strong models of integrated mental health and education support, which deliver very positive outcomes for children and young people. We do not want to see such expertise lost from the system and call for an evaluation of integrated mental health support prior to any decision being taken in relation to where mental health support is sourced within SPPs.

In seeking to re-establish boundaries between education and healthcare, Government needs to be aware of potential policy inconsistency. The recent

consultation on Supporting Children with Medical Needs in Schools proposes to give schools considerable further health-related duties. It is not clear why schools can be de-facto health workers for some services but not for mental health.

We call for Government to fully set out its plans and rationale for removing the SEMH category in its consultation response and to set out its understanding of what this will mean in practice for special schools currently designated as SEMH.

Experts at Hand – capacity to give and access to receive

We welcome the recognition that special schools have a contribution to make to developing SEND expertise in mainstream schools. We have noted the recent Experts at Hand guidance to local authorities and the timeline for the release of funding.

We believe that more guidance should have been provided to local authorities about how to actively involve special schools. The absence of this reflects a lack of thought from Government about how special schools could, and should, be meaningful contributors to the programme.

Whilst the funding attached to Experts at Hand is objectively large, once this is divided between local authorities, it is a relatively small sum of money. From the consultation and guidance, it appears that there is a specific focus on funding educational psychologists and specialist speech and language therapists. The amount available to commission support from special schools is small.

We can see opportunities for some special schools to share expertise. Schools working with children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs and, to some extent, Autistic Spectrum Conditions are likely to find a demand for their expertise in Positive Behaviour Support, emotional regulation and curriculum and space adaptations. Schools for children with severe learning difficulties, profound and multiple learning disabilities and complex medical needs have markedly different cohorts from mainstream schools and their role in supporting mainstream is far less clear. We'd like to see further work from Government, working alongside special schools, to better define the type of support that might be provided and which schools might be best placed to provide it. It should also be recognised that expertise is not guaranteed within special schools and we would welcome

chances to define what characterises expertise that could qualify schools to support others.

For many special schools, whilst they are keen to support mainstream schools they have little or no capacity to offer outreach. Many special schools are currently operating at well-above their Pupil Approved Numbers, whilst carrying significant staff vacancies. Schools in this position are unlikely to be able to commit to a sustained programme of outreach. Linked to this, is the need to fully fund support from special schools. We know of many schools that provide outreach at significant cost to their school out of a sense of this being the right thing to do. This is not a sustainable model for scaling up special school support nationally. We would like to see future iterations of the Experts at Hand guidance setting out full cost-recovery expectations of support provided by special schools. Additionally, the new funding should be used to fund new services, not simply move funding to existing outreach programmes from special schools. This is vital if we are to grow expertise in the education system, not simply move money round the system.

Finally, we would like to see Government explore the possibility of special schools being recipients of Experts at Hand support, rather than simply being identified as suppliers. As a group, special schools are diverse. Some cater for children of all types of special educational need whilst others specialise in a single need. There are areas of specialism that are very low incidence, even within special schools. We believe that highly specialist special schools have an important role to play in supporting less specialist schools and that this should be factored into the Experts at Hand Programme. Similarly, we believe that there is a valuable flow of knowledge from mainstream schools to special schools, such as on subject specialism. We would like to find ways of making this more of a common activity.

Ensuring short-term placements are feasible

We were pleased to see the possibility of short-term placements in special schools mentioned in the reforms consultation. For some children, relatively short-term interventions can be transformative and allow them to return to a lower-intensity education setting. We want to ensure that the opportunity for such placements is used well. We want to work with Government to develop a map of which children might be most likely to benefit from short-term placements, what interventions are most effective and the optimal

time for specialist placements. Alongside this, we want to look at the structures that need to be in place to enable special schools to deliver short-term interventions, e.g. dedicated staff and capacity within place numbers to support in-year fluctuations.

The ‘most complex’ of the ‘most complex’ – building capacity to meet highly complex needs into the system

A footnote on page 80 of the consultation document suggests that learners who attend Non-Maintained Special Schools (NMSS) are seen as providing particularly specialist support for children with low-incidence disabilities. NASS fully supports this view of the NMSS sector but notes that these characteristics are not exclusively held by NMSS. We are looking to Government to carry out further work to define what is meant by the ‘most complex’ in terms of a service response, determine who should deliver it and to ensure that there is a sufficiency of such services. The latter will require determination of which services can be delivered at a local level, which require sub-regional or regional commissioning and which are seen as national resources. Where these resources are currently unevenly geographically distributed, we would like to see a commitment to build capacity regionally. This will require local authorities thinking about SEND provision beyond a local level – something that there appears to be no mechanism for within the reform proposals.

In the past, Government programmes delivered programmes that increased regional capacity for SEND, such as the SEND Regional Partnerships from 2002-2010 and the Commissioning Support Programme from 2010-2013. Both showed that with a dedicated focus on regional provision and dedicated funding, capacity for low-incidence needs can be increased. However, neither programme led to sustained capacity once dedicated funding was ceased and we have seen a decrease in local-authority driven regional initiatives over the past five years. This suggests that low-incidence provision needs an ongoing regional strategy and funding, whether this is at a local authority or national level.

NASS and Dame Christine Lenehan have repeatedly called for the development of a SEND Innovation fund to foster, develop, replicate and scale new and effective interventions in pedagogy and therapeutic support for learners with SEND. Knowledge transfer will be a key pillar of these reforms and we need to ensure that this knowledge is evidence-based, robust and reflecting real world practice. We would like to see such a

programme at the centre of the proposed investigation into what works for learners with SEND and the upcoming review of the National Curriculum.

Conclusion

We believe that a healthy, well-funded special school sector is essential for the successful delivery of SEND Reforms. The current focus on delivering SEND support within mainstream schools leaves special schools at risk of becoming a forgotten partner and risks the diminishing of the highly specialist support and interventions that many special schools currently offer.

The reforms create a great opportunity for Government to undertake a review of the future role of special schools – something they have not done since 2003. The current proposals fail to set out a compelling vision for the contribution that special schools could make for both learners on their school rolls and for children with SEND more generally. We look forward to working further with Government on this vision.