

# **SEND Reform**

Views of Crawley stakeholders.

Facilitated by Peter Lamb MP  
Crawley, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2026



## **Introduction**

The Government is currently consulting on proposed changes to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision in the state education system.

This submission has been prepared by Peter Lamb, Member of Parliament for Crawley, to represent the views of local stakeholders within the Crawley constituency on the proposed changes.

### ***Engagement Process***

Local engagement took the form of a 3-hour roundtable discussion on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> May, held at Northgate Community Centre in the Crawley constituency.

Participants were self-selecting, with all those who had written to the constituency office since July 2024 receiving an email invitation, and sign-ups also encouraged via Peter Lamb's website and social media channels. In all, 60 local stakeholders signed-up to participate, with 19 attending on the day.

The format for the day was a presentation on the proposals, followed by participants being divided into four feedback groups to discuss the proposals in four sections (mainstream provision, special schools, EHCPs/ISPs, and rights and resolutions). Following which there was an opportunity for each group to report back to the meeting.

There was also an opportunity for further points to be made in writing after the event.

### ***Report***

Conversations were recorded with a volunteer on each table also noting down the key points of the discussion. Following the event the recordings were transcribed and used alongside the notes and any other written submissions to produce the report.

In drafting the report, responses were coded thematically and then analysed alongside other responses on the same topics, the sum of which is presented below under the four main headings used during the discussion.

# Mainstream provision

## *Summary*

While there is broad support for the ambition to strengthen inclusive mainstream education, parents consistently report that current mainstream provision is often unable to meet SEND needs effectively or consistently. Families described children whose needs were overlooked or misunderstood, support that was insufficient or inaccessible, and school environments lacking the understanding, flexibility, and resources required for genuine inclusion. These experiences have contributed to deteriorating mental health, exclusions, breakdowns in school relationships, and families withdrawing children from mainstream settings altogether.

There is strong concern that expanding mainstream provision without equivalent investment risks increasing pressure on schools, staff, and families while failing to address existing shortcomings. Parents emphasise that meaningful inclusion requires wider structural, cultural, and resource reform rather than changes to placement models alone.

## *Current System*

Parents described significant weaknesses within current mainstream SEND provision, including:

- Children masking difficulties during the school day, leading needs to be overlooked or minimised.
- Behaviour linked to unmet need resulting in exclusions and disciplinary responses rather than support.
- Limited understanding of SEND among some school leaders and staff, including dismissive attitudes towards neurodivergence.
- Oversubscribed SEND provision and insufficient staffing capacity.
- Support plans identifying needs without meaningful actions or interventions.
- Families removing children from mainstream settings due to impacts on wellbeing and mental health.
- Parents feeling disbelieved, dismissed, or blamed when raising concerns.
- Poor awareness of rights, support pathways, and available provision.
- There were also concerns that mainstream environments themselves are often unsuitable, particularly large class sizes, limited flexibility, and

insufficient support outside classroom settings such as breaktimes, wraparound care, and extracurricular provision. Overall confidence in mainstream education's current ability to deliver genuinely inclusive support remains low.

### ***Proposals***

Parents broadly support the principle of strengthening mainstream inclusion but believe reforms must extend beyond structural changes. Key concerns raised include:

- Insufficient SEND funding and concern that resources may not reach frontline provision.
- Teacher training proposals viewed as inadequate in scale and funding.
- Lack of mandatory, standardised SEND training across the workforce.
- Current class sizes considered incompatible with effective inclusion.
- Limited proposals regarding support during unstructured times and outside classrooms.
- Concerns regarding short-term specialist placements and the impact of repeated transitions.
- Parents expect reform to include:
  - Protected and transparent SEND funding.
  - Comprehensive SEND training embedded within Initial Teacher Training and ongoing professional development.
  - Smaller class sizes alongside qualified SEND support within classrooms.
  - Improved provision beyond lessons, including sensory spaces, break support, and wraparound care.
  - Individualised approaches reflecting children's specific needs rather than generic condition awareness.
  - Cultural change recognising SEND children as individuals with strengths rather than challenges to manage.

### ***Alternatives***

Participants proposed several alternatives and additions to strengthen mainstream inclusion, including:

- Greater curriculum flexibility and interest-led learning approaches.

- Teaching neurodiversity awareness to all pupils to improve understanding and reduce stigma.
- Calmer classroom environments with reduced sensory overload.
- Universal access to sensory supports, regulation spaces, and movement tools.
- Normalising neurodiversity across school culture and promoting visible role models.
- Embedding differentiated teaching approaches as standard practice rather than exception.
- These approaches were viewed as potentially improving inclusion without relying solely on structural reforms.

### ***Further Reflections***

Parents raised broader concerns regarding implementation, workforce sustainability, and long-term deliverability. Key reflections included:

- Mainstream expansion must be matched by investment in staffing, training, and resources.
- Teacher workload and workforce pressures risk worsening without additional support.
- Growing numbers of families are turning to home education following breakdowns in mainstream provision.
- Mental health impacts on children and families are substantial and frequently linked to systemic failures rather than disability itself.
- Reforms require realistic implementation timelines given the scale of cultural and institutional change required.
- There was a strong consensus that inclusion must move beyond policy language and become embedded within school culture and wider society. Parents emphasised that meaningful reform requires co-production, accountability, sustained investment, and recognition of the scale of transformation needed to deliver lasting change.

# **Special Schools - Alternative Provision**

## ***Summary***

Parents strongly support the principle of a child-centred, adaptive, and personalised SEND system, with access to specialist support and pathways that prepare children for adulthood.

However, there are significant concerns that the proposed reforms:

- Lack clarity, particularly around definitions, roles, and accountability.
- Risk introducing generic provision models that do not meet individual needs.
- Do not address the critical shortage of specialist provision and trained staff.
- Place an unsustainable burden on parents to navigate and challenge the system.

Without substantial investment, clearer frameworks, and stronger accountability, there is a risk the reforms will not deliver meaningful improvements.

## ***Current System***

Parent feedback indicates the current system is under significant strain and characterised by:

Insufficient Provision and Capacity.

- Not enough specialist school places or SEN provision.
- New housing developments without corresponding school infrastructure.
- Long travel times due to limited local provision.
- Increasing numbers of children being home educated without oversight or support.

Workforce and Training Gaps.

- Mainstream schools often rely on SEN units where staff are not adequately trained.
- SENCO training is inconsistent in quality.

- Limited access to specialist expertise.

#### Inconsistent and Ineffective Processes.

- EHCPs are often perceived as not being delivered effectively.
- Lack of clarity on who enforces provision.
- Decision-making processes appear inconsistent and influenced by resource constraints.

#### Parent Burden and System Complexity.

- Parents must take on a highly active advocacy role, often described as requiring expert-level knowledge.
- Support services (e.g. SENDIAS) are helpful but can increase the burden by creating more actions for parents.
- Concerns about what happens when parents are unable to advocate due to health or lack of support.

#### Gaps in Outcomes and Oversight.

- Limited evidence of progress in some settings, which is perceived as acceptable.
- Uncertainty around reasonable targets and accountability.
- Lack of monitoring for children outside formal education settings.

### ***Proposals***

Parents recognise that the reforms aim to:

- Introduce more structured and standardised provision.
- Clarify pathways across education (formal, semi-formal, vocational).
- Improve consistency in decision-making.
- Enhance preparation for adulthood.

However, concerns remain about how these proposals will operate in practice:

- Lack of clarity on what “complex needs” means and who decides.
- Introduction of provision “packages” or bands, which may be overly generic.

- Uncertainty regarding:
  - Who assesses and makes decisions.
  - Whether case workers will continue.
  - How disagreements will be resolved (e.g. tribunal processes).
- Concern that children may be moved from existing placements under new systems.
- Limited detail on how EHCP delivery will be enforced.

### ***Alternatives***

#### 1. Maintain Personalisation.

- Avoid generic provision packages.
- Ensure provision remains flexible and tailored to individual needs.
- Recognise differing learning pathways (formal, semi-formal, vocational).

#### 2. Increase Capacity and Investment.

- Expand specialist schools and SEN provision.
- Invest in infrastructure, staffing, and training.
- Ensure funding matches increased demand.

#### 3. Improve Clarity and Transparency.

- Provide a clear, nationally consistent definition of “complex needs”.
- Clearly define:
  - Who assesses.
  - Who makes decisions.
  - Who enforces provision.

#### 4. Strengthen Workforce Capability.

- Introduce consistent, high-quality SEND training for all staff.
- Increase availability of SEN-trained practitioners.

#### 5. Strengthen Accountability.

- Ensure robust systems to monitor EHCP delivery.
- Introduce clearer oversight where provision is not effective.
- Ensure decisions are not driven primarily by financial considerations.

#### 6. Improve Flexibility and Pathways.

- Allow flexible review points, not only fixed transitions.
- Provide clear next steps when:
  - A placement fails.
  - An Individual Learning Plan does not work.
- Include pathways for children who cannot attend or engage with school.

#### 7. Address Home Education Risks.

- Introduce appropriate monitoring and support.
- Ensure children educated at home are not overlooked.

#### 8. Strengthen Family Support.

- Provide support for families without strong networks.
- Plan for situations where parents are:
  - Unwell.
  - Unable to advocate.
- Reduce reliance on parents to manage complex systems.

#### 9. Improve System Coordination.

- Strengthen collaboration across local authorities.
- Clarify how independent and specialist schools fit within proposals.
- Improve sharing of expertise and resources.

### ***Further Reflections***

- There is a fundamental concern about the balance between standardisation and individualisation; reforms must not prioritise efficiency over children's needs.

- The definition of “complex needs” is critical and must be transparent and consistent.
- Emotional and social factors, including friendships and stability, must be considered in placement decisions.
- Parents report experiences of stress, trauma, and lack of trust within the current system, which must be addressed.
- There is a need for greater clarity on post-18 provision and long-term support.
- Without sufficient funding and workforce capacity, reforms risk being theoretical rather than deliverable.

## **EHCPS/ISPs**

### ***Summary***

In discussing EHCPS and ISPs, there was a strong sense the current system does not work, but little confidence in the proposed changes.

### ***Current System***

During the discussion on EHCPS and ISPs, there was little positive that anyone had to say regarding the current system:

- Universally perceived as dysfunctional, although opinions as to why varied, from a lack of accountability resulting in the system not being applied correctly, to inherent failures in the model.
- Things have to change.
- Huge delays in assessment and delivery on EHCPS.
- Insufficient trained educational and psychological SEND professionals to undertake the expert work.
- County council focused on avoiding responsibilities, including through legal action, wasting money.
- Mediation is not possible as you can't pin down people to meet.
- All those involved in the process work for West Sussex, so aren't impartial and instead focus on what the county council wants, highlighted by the fact private assessments identify greater needs than those employed by the council.
- Unfair for level of support to come down to parental income.
- Lack of contact between those undertaking the assessment with the child, and general inability to contact them, means assessments are inaccurate and generic. Spurious details highlight where sections of reports have just been copied and pasted.
- Generally well-behaved children are made out to be poorly-behaved due to rare incidents where a lack of reasonable adaptations has created frustration the child cannot manage. As a consequence, they then struggle to find placements, as schools fear they lack the capacity to deal with behavioural issues.
- In other cases the EHCPS are massively out-of-date and consequently ignore where additional developmental issues have emerged at a later stage.
- For others, it focuses too much on where they are capable and ignores the challenges where they lack capacity.
- Lots of children being pushed into mainstream provision when it isn't clear that their needs can be met, problem seems to be particularly acute for post-16 provision.

- There is a belief children can only access special needs schools if they have already been expelled from mainstream provision.
- Authorities are quick to enforce when a child is out of school, but slow to respond to the things which would keep them in school.
- SEND training in schools is outdated, even for SENCOs.
- System prioritises academic outcomes over all other issues, even though goal needs to be preparing children for life.
- However, for all their faults, EHCPs are a physical acknowledgement that support is needed and can be legally enforced.

### ***Proposals***

While a number of concerns expressed regarding the current system are things the new proposals for SEND claim to try to address, there was a high level of scepticism about how they would work in practice:

- The current system does not work, so what chance is there for the new system to work?.
- There was a lot of concern over who would assess whether a child needed an EHCP, their level of impartiality, how extensive their expertise, and what direct experience of the child they would have when determining their needs.
- There was significant fear that the threshold for 'complex' would be set to far and children would effectively lose all meaningful support.
- Several times, people expressed the view that an ISP seemed to be effectively the same thing as an ILP.
- Where an EHCP was granted, worries existed that the new Specialist Support Packages would fail to account for the huge range of differences which exist between children who might in all other regards appear identical.
- It was felt that the proposed training of school staff needed to be extensive in order to understand the nuances of SEND children.
- There were concerns about existing capacity in the system, both in terms of time available to take on all this new work training, undertaking ISPs, and providing the required levels of support to SEND pupils while managing a class.
- The existing shortage of teaching assistants in the system was also raised, due to low pay either forcing schools to either find the money elsewhere or struggle to recruit.
- There was scepticism that Experts in Hand would work effectively, given existing shortages of professionals in many of the required areas of expertise.
- Concerns that without additional staff, students would simply be left on their own outside the classroom, not learning.

- There was also a view was expressed that all of the proposals were simply a cost-cutting exercise which would result in some SEND children going without the support they need.
- Without the legal enforceability of EHCPs there were concerns that there would be a lack of accountability to ensure that children got the support they needed.
- While having an independent SEND expert on the school complaints panel was viewed positively, there were questions as to how independent they would really be based upon who appointed and paid them, and who the other panel members would be.
- There were a number of concerns around using Ofsted to assess levels of support, including that as schools were notified in advance of an assessment that they might try to hide pupils they were failing to support adequately.
- Many questions related to the detail of how the policies would work in practice and potential scenarios which did not fall easily within the DfE's examples of how existing SEND in the system would be dealt with under the proposals.

### ***Alternatives***

While no dramatically different alternatives were put forward from the current or proposed models, there were some suggestions:

- Retaining the legal enforceability of EHCPs and the tribunal process for all SEND pupils.
- Requiring all those who were badged as 'independent' were genuinely independent.
- Ensuring the level of training for SEND needs genuinely reflected best practice at a high level.
- That more TAs are needed to support SEND pupils in school.
- The need for Crawley to secure additional special school places.
- Also need to address the care and health parts of children's needs.

### ***Further Reflections***

- The importance of understanding that many children 'mask' their condition in order to fit in and in the process fail to have their needs met.
- Children are being failed in school environments, developing PTSD due to a lack of understanding of how to meet their needs. This has a huge impact on their childhood.
- Parents and carers are developing PTSD due to the way they are dealt with by the system. They suffer a level of exhaustion from all the different pressures on top of having to fight to ensure their child's needs are met. Not every parent or carer has the agency to do so, resulting in children being let down.

- We don't just need to adapt schools, these children are going to go out into the world and we need to ensure that they can function out there too.
- We need far better, more integrated records systems between health, education and care.

## **Rights and Reconciliation.**

### ***Summary***

Parents consistently describe the current system as difficult to navigate, inconsistent, and adversarial, often requiring escalation to tribunal to secure appropriate support. There is a strong concern that the proposed reforms do not adequately resolve these systemic issues and may instead introduce further uncertainty, reduce access to support, and increase inequality.

### ***Current System***

Parents report that the existing SEND system is complex, inconsistent, and frequently fails to deliver support without challenge. Key issues include:

- Difficulty navigating processes and unclear communication.
- Heavy reliance on tribunal as a routine rather than last-resort mechanism.
- Local authorities failing to meet statutory deadlines.
- Decisions influenced by local policy rather than legal duty.
- Schools not consistently delivering agreed provision.
- Variability in support quality across settings.

Parents also highlight that inspection and oversight mechanisms, including Ofsted, do not reliably reflect day-to-day SEND provision. There is a perception that inspections can be staged and that SEND provision is not consistently prioritised.

Overall, confidence in the system's ability to deliver fair, consistent, and enforceable support is low.

### ***Proposals***

The reforms propose changes including a greater emphasis on support within "targeted" and "targeted plus" layers, potentially reducing reliance on EHCPs.

However, parents raise concerns about the implications of this approach, particularly:

- Increased numbers of children supported outside EHCPs.

- Reliance on provision that may be non-binding and inconsistently delivered.
- Lack of clarity around Individual Support Plans (ISPs) and their enforceability.
- Uncertainty about where legal rights apply.

Parents expect that any reforms should include:

- Clear legal definitions and enforceable rights across all support levels.
- Minimum standards and entitlements within targeted and targeted plus provision.
- Strong accountability frameworks with consequences for non-compliance.
- Effective early dispute resolution to reduce reliance on tribunal.
- Genuine independence and SEND expertise in decision-making and oversight.
- Stronger SEND focus within Ofsted inspections.
- Improved communication, transparency, and system navigation.

### ***Alternatives***

Alternative approaches to the proposed reforms could include:

- Maintaining or strengthening EHCP access rather than reducing it.
- Introducing legally enforceable standards within targeted and targeted plus provision.
- Improving early-stage decision-making to reduce the need for tribunals.
- Enhancing funding, training, and SEND expertise across schools and local authorities.
- Reforming accountability mechanisms before restructuring support layers.
- Strengthening Ofsted's SEND inspection framework without changing entitlement structures.

These alternatives may better address existing weaknesses without increasing uncertainty or reducing legal protections.

### ***Further Reflections***

Parents raise broader concerns about implementation, accountability, and long-term impact. Key reflections include:

- Legal rights must be clearly defined, transparent, and consistently applied.
- Accountability mechanisms must include meaningful consequences for failure.
- Independence of roles and panels must be genuine, with clear oversight and SEND expertise.
- Inspection systems must accurately reflect real provision, not staged compliance.
- System complexity must be reduced, with clear pathways between support levels.
- Parent voice must be meaningfully included through genuine co-production.

There is particular concern that reforms could result in:

- Reduced access to legally enforceable support.
- Greater inconsistency across local areas.
- Increased reliance on discretionary provision.
- Continued adversarial relationships between families and authorities.

Overall, parents remain sceptical. They are seeking reassurance that reforms will deliver practical, enforceable improvements rather than structural changes that weaken protections and fail to address the root causes of dissatisfaction.