

A guide to SEND reform

For governing boards in schools and trusts

Updated September 2026

In February 2026, alongside the [schools white paper](#), the government published its [proposed plans](#) to reform the SEND system. The proposals were developed in response to growing concerns about the system's ability to meet the rising needs of young people with SEND. You can find out more about the state of the system and our recommendations in [NGA's SEND policy paper](#).

Since then, the Department for Education (DfE) has announced several aspects of the reform. This guide intends to support governing boards in understanding the government's long-term vision for the SEND system. It outlines the actions schools need to take in the short-term and provides a roadmap for the transition to a more inclusive mainstream system in the years to come.

Current legislation relating to supporting pupils with SEND remains in force, so the board's responsibilities have not changed. You can use NGA's SEND [checklist](#) and [monitoring tool](#) to support you in meeting these duties.

The government's ambition

The government's core aim is to re-shape the SEND system so that mainstream education settings can cater to the needs of all their pupils. However, special schools will continue to play a vital role for young people whose needs are best met in those settings.

The DfE acknowledges that the current system is failing to deliver for the 1 in 3 pupils who have SEND at some point in their schooling.

To achieve this, the government is using five key principles to guide their decisions:

- **Early intervention:** providing support as soon as concerns are raised without waiting for a formal diagnosis.
- **Local provision:** educating children at a setting close to their home alongside their peers.
- **Evidence-based:** ensuring all settings use practices proven to support long-term outcomes.
- **Fair access:** resourcing every setting to enable them to meet common and predictable needs and developing systems so pupils are placed in settings that best support them.
- **Shared responsibility:** strengthening multi-agency collaboration between education, health and care services.

A new approach to supporting pupils with SEND

All mainstream schools will be expected to introduce a consistent baseline of inclusion, called the ‘**universal offer**’. This sets out the support that should ordinarily be available in every mainstream setting, enabling needs to be identified and met early, without requiring a formal diagnosis.

A trained workforce

The offer includes trained staff who can meet most children’s needs by adapting teaching and drawing on strategies that remove commonly occurring barriers to learning.

From September 2026, the DfE will support schools to upskill all staff (including support staff) on SEND and inclusion by publishing materials for in-house CPD. This will be followed by new national training programmes, expected to be available from 2027.

Layers of support

Pupils requiring additional support will have access to one of the three layers built on top of the universal offer. Children will be able to move between these layers as their needs change.

Support	Intended group	Features
Targeted	Pupils with commonly occurring needs in mainstream schools that cannot be typically met by the universal offer alone.	Small group interventions eg language work or pre-teaching vocabulary, delivered by classroom teachers or teaching assistants.
Targeted plus	Pupils whose needs require more specialist expertise and resources.	Access to the new ‘experts at hand’ offer from September 2026, which will provide schools with support from locally based specialists like educational psychologists and occupational therapists. Placements in an inclusion base for more bespoke learning environments. These will be dedicated spaces in mainstream settings that offer specialist and/or more targeted provision for pupils whose needs cannot be met in a mainstream classroom.*
Specialist	Pupils with the most complex needs that require provision substantially different from the standard mainstream curriculum. They will have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) under the new system. All	Pupils will receive a nationally defined Specialist Provision Package (SPP), which will set out exactly what adjustments (eg staffing ratios, specialised equipment, environmental adaptations) are required for specific profiles of complex need. The SPP will be included in a child’s EHCP, and in the future, only children assessed as

	existing EHCPs will remain in place until September 2030.	requiring the level of support detailed in a national SPP will be entitled to an EHCP. Provision will be delivered in either a special school or a specialist base in a mainstream setting.
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*The government has committed capital funding to expand inclusion bases in the coming years. In the meantime, schools considering this provision should focus on strengthening their universal offer and engaging with the local authority to understand the local area's strategic plans.

Individual support plans (ISPs)

By 2028, the government plans to introduce a legal duty on schools to produce and monitor an ISP for any child receiving targeted, targeted plus or specialist support. This will be a digital document that sets out:

- the child's specific barriers to learning
- the evidence-based interventions being used by school
- reasonable adjustments required
- intended outcomes of the support

The government expects ISPs to evolve with a child's needs, and ISPs will, as a minimum, require an annual review with parents. The document may also be transferred between settings (eg from primary to secondary) to ensure support is not lost during a transition.

Governing boards will be expected to consider the effectiveness of the support outlined in ISPs.

The inclusive mainstream fund

From July 2026, schools will receive the inclusive mainstream fund – a grant to support whole school practices that remove barriers to learning. **This will not replace existing SEND funding streams and schools will continue to receive their notional SEN budget in core funding.**

Each school will receive an allocation of the fund based on factors used in the schools national funding formula (NFF). Allocations for the 2026 to 2027 financial year can be found [here](#). Further information on the distribution and calculation of the fund can be found [here](#).

Using the fund

Any activity funded by the inclusion mainstream fund, in part or in full, must fall under one of the seven principles of inclusion, which include:

1. ambitious leadership and governance that embeds inclusion
2. evidence-based support prioritising early intervention
3. high-quality adaptive teaching with curriculum designed for all learners
4. enriching provision beyond the classroom that all children can access
5. a safe and respectful culture fostering belonging, attendance, and participation in learning
6. strong partnerships with families and wider services
7. inclusive environments with continuous improvements to accessibility

While schools determine how best to use their allocation, the DfE has made clear that the fund is intended to strengthen provision across the school rather than support individual pupils. As such, governing boards should be cautious of approaches that focus on a small number of pupils without demonstrating wider benefits to whole-school inclusive practice.

Some examples of where schools might spend the fund include:

- CPD for leaders and teachers
- teaching assistant training
- delivery of early intervention programmes

As with other areas of school expenditure, governors and trustees should ensure there are appropriate arrangements in place to monitor the impact and value for money of spend. This includes seeking assurances that investments have been informed by evidence and have a clear rationale linked to identified need.

Questions for governors and trustees to ask

- Is funding being used to address barriers to learning that affect groups of pupils – not as a substitute for individual funding arrangements?
- Does the fund complement existing resources, including the school's notional SEN budget and other inclusion-related funding such as the pupil premium?
- Will the planned activity likely lead to sustainable improvements in provision?
- How will the impact of funded activity be measured and evaluated?
- What evidence have we used to assure ourselves that a need is being met?
- Have we drawn on the views of relevant stakeholders?

Mainstream inclusion strategy

From December 2026, all schools will be required to develop and publish an inclusion strategy. This should set out the school's plans to deliver inclusive whole-school approaches and evidence-based support to meet the needs of their cohort, including pupils with SEND.

As part of the conditions of the grant, schools are expected to document how they are using the inclusion mainstream fund in the strategy.

Governors and trustees will have a role to crucial play in scrutinising the document. This will include an assessment of whether it:

- accurately outlines the use of the inclusive mainstream fund
- delivers on its aims to support whole school inclusion
- is supported by evidence-based initiatives
- aligns with wider school policies

Eventually, Ofsted will assess how leaders embed this strategy into practice and how staff are equipped to deliver it.

The DfE has published [guidance on developing your strategy](#), which includes a template you may use. To help young people and parents understand the school's overarching aims, the strategy should include a statement of intent which sets out the schools or trust's objectives for whole-school inclusion and meeting the needs of pupils with SEND. The DfE expects this section to be concise (around 500 words or less) and written in an accessible style.

Inclusive school environments

The proposed reform encourages schools to consider how the physical environment enables pupils with SEND to participate in all areas of school life. This is a core aspect of 'inclusion by design'.

The [DfE's guidance on inclusive education estates](#) emphasises that mainstream settings should be designed and adapted to remove barriers to learning for all pupils, particularly those with SEND. For governing boards, this means ensuring inclusion is considered as part of ongoing [estate management](#) and aligning accessibility planning with the school's inclusion strategy.

Governors and trustees should seek assurance that leaders:

- consider accessibility and inclusion when making decisions made about buildings, maintenance, refurbishment and the use of the school site
- involve key stakeholders (eg pupils, parents and health experts) in identifying barriers in the school environment through a 'day in the life' approach – schools are encouraged to step into the shoes of pupils with specific needs to identify subtle environmental barriers, such as noisy corridors or confusing layouts
- review whether existing spaces could be used differently to better support inclusion
- evaluate whether environmental changes are improving participation, wellbeing and learning

Ten core inclusive design elements

When making decisions about the estate, governors and trustees should be familiar with the ten elements that form the basis of an inclusive environment:

1. Accessibility and movement (clear and unobstructed routes)
2. Navigation and wayfinding (consistent visual markers and signage)
3. Quiet spaces and sensory comfort (low-stimulus areas for regulation)
4. Acoustics (managing background noise and echo)
5. Lighting and visual comfort (controllable and glare-free light)
6. Ventilation (maintaining fresh air quality)
7. Thermal comfort (satisfaction with temperature)
8. Access to nature (access to indoor and outdoor spaces that connect pupils with nature)
9. Sanitary provision (dignified and accessible toilets)
10. Furniture, fittings and equipment (adaptable and ergonomic choices)