

Beyond Structural Change: What England's 2026 SEND Reforms Must Deliver

A practice-led framework for rebuilding trust, capacity and accountability

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EXECUTIVE ABSTRACT

England has entered another decisive period of SEND reform. The central test is not whether responsibilities are rearranged, but whether children receive earlier, dependable support and families experience a system that is understandable, lawful and humane. This paper examines the scale of demand, the limits of finance-led reform and six conditions for credible implementation.

A system under pressure

The case for reform is overwhelming. Department for Education statistics show 538,500 pupils with an Education, Health and Care plan in 2026, an 11.6 per cent annual increase and more than double the 2016 number. Growth is not, by itself, proof of over-identification. It may reflect improved recognition, unmet need becoming visible, failures of ordinarily available provision, or families seeking statutory protection because confidence in mainstream support is weak.

The National Audit Office found that high-needs funding rose by 58 per cent in real terms between 2014-15 and 2024-25 to £10.7 billion, without commensurate improvement in outcomes. The lesson is not that investment is ineffective. It is that money entering a fragmented system cannot compensate for unclear expectations, workforce shortages, late intervention and adversarial decision-making.

Reform must begin with a dependable universal offer

The 2026 white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, proposes stronger support as standard in mainstream education and a revised Code of Practice. This direction is important. A credible universal offer must specify what children and families can expect, who is responsible, how quality will be measured and what happens when provision is unavailable.

National consistency should establish a floor, not a ceiling. Standardisation must not become a mechanism for denying individual assessment or replacing professional judgement with rigid menus. The objective should be fewer families needing statutory escalation because effective support is already present - not fewer plans achieved by restricting access.

Capacity before compliance

New duties will fail if schools, health services and local authorities lack the people, knowledge and time to deliver them. Implementation therefore requires a workforce compact covering teacher development, SENCO capacity, educational psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and social care. Training must extend beyond awareness to supervised application in real settings.

Local inclusion plans should publish capacity assumptions alongside spending commitments. If a locality promises earlier speech-and-language intervention, it should disclose waiting-time targets, workforce availability and routes for escalation. Transparency turns aspiration into a testable public commitment.

Family trust is infrastructure

Families often carry knowledge that cannot be produced by a short assessment: how a child communicates distress, responds to sensory demands, recovers after school or experiences apparently minor transitions. Treating this evidence as anecdotal weakens decision quality. Reform should make co-production visible in records, reviews and service design.

Trust also depends on accessible communication. Documents should be written in plain language, available in suitable formats and explained through dialogue. Cultural responsiveness is not an optional diversity exercise. It is a practical requirement when families interpret disability, professional authority and help-seeking through different experiences.

Six tests for credible reform

Reform should be judged against six tests: earlier support without rationing; a clearly funded universal offer; protected routes to individual statutory provision; measurable workforce capacity; meaningful child and family participation; and public reporting of outcomes, waiting times and implementation gaps.

The ultimate measure will not be the elegance of a new structure. It will be whether a child receives support before exclusion, absence or family crisis; whether practitioners can act without navigating impossible thresholds; and whether parents spend less time fighting the system and more time participating in their child's development.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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AUTHOR NOTE

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