



Public Accounts Committee

Susan Acland-Hood
Permanent Secretary
Department for Education

Professor Sir Chris Whitty KCB
Interim Permanent Secretary
Department of Health and Social Care

By email

13 January 2025

Support for children and young people with special educational needs

Dear Permanent Secretaries

The Public Accounts Committee has today published its first report of the new Parliament concerning the work of your departments to support children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) in England. SEN support has the potential, through the dedication of teachers and other specialists working with families, to help some of the most vulnerable children reach their full potential. However, my Committee's inquiry found a system in disarray. Mired in red tape, lacking funding, and failing to produce value for money, overall, it is failing to provide the appropriate levels of support. These failings will inevitably undermine parents' confidence in the system and threaten to create a lost generation of children leaving school without having received the help they need to reach their potential.

Accessing SEN support should be a straightforward process for all parents and carers: instead, we found that it is an often chaotic and adversarial system that disadvantaged those less able to navigate it, so creating inequalities.

Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans can be a vital passport to access SEN support, so the significant geographical variation in the number of EHC plans that are produced within the statutory 20 week period is concerning. Rates of 80% and 90% should be considered inadequate given the uncertainty and anxiety that delays can create for families. However, some local authorities failed to produce a single EHC within the statutory timeframe during 2023.

We welcome the Government's acknowledgement in evidence to the Committee that the early identification and support of children with SEN could reduce demand and be more cost effective. However, we are concerned that the Government still does not understand why demand for EHCs and SEN support has increased so markedly since 2015, undermining its ability to provide value for money and plan adequately for future provision.

For children who do receive SEN support, inclusivity in mainstream settings (where appropriate) is important. This needs to be addressed and we look forward to your responses to our Report – setting out the provision that children with SEN should expect in relation to inclusive education and school accountability. In assessing outcomes, it is vital to include additional factors beyond just the academic achievement of children with SEN. It is also important that schools receive adequate additional



Public Accounts Committee

resources to provide SEN support without having to divert resources needed for the education of other children.

Funding is key to achieve these ambitions, yet many local authorities' educational budgets are already in a parlous state. The impact of the cumulative £4.6 billion deficit has been deferred under the "statutory override". The expiry of this scheme in March 2026 presents an existential threat to many councils' financial position. The Government must set out – no later than the end of March 2025 – what will happen next so that local authorities can prepare without disrupting SEN provision. Left unresolved, the issue risks undermining the whole of local government finance and also worsening the SEN situation.

Parliament is currently considering the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill which provides an opportunity for all Members of the House to consider any changes needed to legislation on SEN. We also welcome the recently launched inquiry of the Education Committee, "Solving the SEND crisis", and encourage interested parties to help inform that Committee's work by submitting evidence by their deadline of 30 January 2025. I hope that your departments will take the opportunity to engage constructively with the inquiry.

We look forward to receiving your response to our Report within the next two months and will continue to closely monitor this issue to ensure the issues are resolved swiftly. I am copying this letter to your respective Secretaries of State and the Chair of the Education Committee.

Yours Sincerely

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP
Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts

Cc The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education
The Rt Hon Wes Streeting MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Helen Hayes MP, Chair of the Education Committee, House of Commons