



Rt Honourable Bridget Philipson  
House of Commons  
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## **The Schools White Paper 2026 – Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Reform**

### **Response to the Consultation**

I am writing in response to SEND Reform: putting children and young people first, published alongside the Schools White Paper in February 2026 as part of a consultation to reform the SEND system.

In preparing this response, I am drawing on my constituency casework since being elected as the Member of Parliament for Esher and Walton in July 2024, and on consultation meetings I have held with parents, educators, children and young people, key stakeholders, local leaders, and those with lived experience of SEND provision in Surrey. I am grateful to my constituents who have also written to me directly to share their opinions and concerns about these proposals.

I have met the Secretary of State and described the current state of provision in Surrey as broken. Surrey Liberal Democrat MPs discovered, through a Freedom of Information request, that 1,800 children in Surrey were missing out on education in 2024 due to a lack of SEND provision. Parents described the current system as “resource-led, not needs-led.” Recent House of Commons Library constituency data shows that in Esher and Walton, 4.6% of pupils in mainstream schools are accessing support through an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP), significantly above the Southeast and England averages of 3.3%. In my constituency, 11.8% of pupils in mainstream schools are receiving SEN support. These figures underline the pressure already facing local schools, families, and specialist services, and reinforce issues raised throughout this consultation about whether the proposed reforms are matched by sufficient capacity, funding, and specialist provision.

I share your ambition to reform SEND provision. But it is important to relay the concerns that have been shared with me about these reforms, and any unintended consequences that may result.

### **Putting Children and Young People First - Move to Inclusive Mainstream**

While I support the Government’s ambition to increase inclusion in early years settings, schools, and colleges in principle – the universal offer, inclusion must be meaningful and properly resourced. Headteachers and parents already experience Surrey County Council placing children in mainstream schools when those schools are unable to meet their needs.

Mainstreaming can be inequitable in practice when schools lack the staffing, specialist provision and funding required to meet needs effectively. Currently, placing children in mainstream settings has coincided with the loss of specialist placements, leaving mainstream schools carrying unsustainable



levels of need. This leads to exclusions, safeguarding issues, and wider instability in schools. I meet children who receive their schooling online, are on reduced timetables, or have fallen out of education altogether. Often, the children most likely to face permanent exclusion are those with complex needs because schools are attempting to manage those needs without appropriate specialist support. SEND provision does not exist in a vacuum and must be supported by the appropriate enhanced support in children's services within the local authority.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the system is placing children according to what is available rather than what is appropriate. Parents and teachers broadly support early intervention, better teacher training, and greater awareness of SEND as part of improved support in mainstream settings. However, there is concern that mainstream schools are being expected to meet increasingly complex needs without realistic structural reform.

### **Resourcing**

There are wide concerns around settings being resourced appropriately and sufficiently in order to achieve the National Inclusion Standards, to understand what good looks like and that every child and young person receives the right support.

It is vital that the resources and capacity needed for mainstream settings to rapidly "upskill" to meet increasingly complex needs are made available, particularly given the significant funding gap schools already face, in an environment where budgets and resources are stretched to capacity.

Funding and workforce capacity to implement these SEND Reforms are critical. Parents and practitioners described mainstream schools as already "struggling with lack of funding," while reforms appear to assume an increase in specialist support that many felt was unrealistic. Teaching Assistants were described as undervalued and underpaid. Families also raised concerns about retention within the education workforce, questioning whether teachers and support staff can continue to absorb additional SEND responsibilities without greater support and incentives.

### **Identification of needs**

A recurring issue is identifying special educational needs before crisis point is reached. Some children mask their conditions and so training and capacity must allow for mainstream schools to recognise these often hidden needs. Parents have expressed concerns that the White Paper reforms will not provide for autistic burnout, which many felt is poorly understood within both mainstream education and wider SEND systems. Many children experiencing burnout may appear academically successful or outwardly compliant and mask their condition until they reach a crisis point, at which point they become unable to attend school because mainstream environments have become overwhelming.

Given the number of children who are currently out of school or in receipt of hard-fought-for EOTAS packages to enable them to access educational provision, children who cannot tolerate mainstream environments risk disappearing from the system entirely. Recognising where these children sit within the new system is a major gap in the proposed reforms.

### **Layers of Support for Additional Needs**



Under the proposed new system, layers of additional support are available to children identified as needing support beyond the universal offer. The White Paper sets out an expectation that children will have easy access to the most appropriate support and move through the system as their needs increase or decrease throughout their educational journey. While admirable in its ambition, this may not be realistic, given the current experience of my constituents, who are often battling to get the right support in place for their children, with specialist support lagging behind need, sometimes by years.

### **Individual Support Plans and EHCPs**

There is deep concern about the proposed introduction of digital Individual Support Plans (ISPs) and the future of EHCPs. Families have repeatedly raised issues about EHCPs being removed at transition points – especially at the primary-to-secondary school transition. There are worries that reforms could remove parental power and weaken the legal rights currently attached to EHCPs.

It is proposed that targeted support will be available to children within their settings, delivered by staff through an Individual Support Plan (ISP), which will record needs, support, and expected outcomes of this intervention.

Parents who spoke to me were clear that any ISPs introduced must be legally enforceable and properly resourced. Concerns were also raised about the quality of ISPs and whether schools would realistically be able to manage these additional responsibilities without substantial support.

### **Accountability**

A significant concern raised by parents is that, under the proposed reforms, schools may be effectively asked to “mark their own homework.” My constituents have warned that, without legally enforceable protections, parents may be left to rely solely on school complaints processes or governors, even though schools often lack the expertise, staffing or specialist understanding required to identify complex or less visible forms of need.

Parents questioned what mechanisms would be available to families to challenge inadequate support when children fall below the new threshold for an EHCP but continue to struggle in mainstream settings.

Under the new reforms, there are concerns about how the local authority will be held accountable. The Surrey SEND system is currently described as inconsistent, adversarial, difficult to navigate and lacking clear accountability. A recurring issue is that access to effective support has become “person-dependent, not system-dependent,” with outcomes varying significantly depending on which professionals, officers, or teams a family encounters, rather than being delivered through clear, consistent, and transparent processes. School leaders and parents also worry about the transparency and consistency of EHCP panel decisions.

### **Legal Protection**

A recurring theme across both parent and school evidence was that the growing reliance on tribunals reflects a wider breakdown of confidence in local SEND decision-making processes. Families and schools described situations in which legal challenge becomes the only realistic route to securing provision that professionals have already identified, as necessary. Parents repeatedly described these processes as emotionally and financially exhausting. However, the right of appeal is one of the few



meaningful safeguards remaining in the system. Any attempt to “clip the wings of the tribunal” or to reduce access to challenge is problematic. The new proposals do not protect this.

### **Experts at Hand**

Under the Targeted Plus Support layer, it is proposed an Experts at Hand model will be introduced, bringing together specialists such as speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, and occupational therapists, with each child having a customised support package to reflect their needs. Given that these are already shortage occupations, how can these inclusion reforms be realised without major investment in workforce recruitment and training?

What adjustments will be made to reflect regional disparities in salary levels and in the difficulty of recruitment, which is critical in my own constituency and across Surrey?

### **Inclusion Bases**

While the addition of Inclusion Bases in mainstream settings is welcome, establishing them in schools requires capital investment. Has adequate provision been set aside to achieve this? In addition, running smaller-group sessions in schools and outside the classroom requires more qualified teaching staff to ensure these interventions are meaningful educational experiences. Again, I would like to draw your attention to the existing shortages and burnout across education and health services. These professions have been most affected by decades of underinvestment, while the demands on them continue to grow, as reflected in recruitment and retention levels.

### **Specialist Support**

The highest level of support – Specialist Support – is reserved for those described in the White Paper as having the most complex needs. However, my constituents have raised concerns about the lack of clarity and definition regarding what constitutes ‘complex needs.’ Many feel it is poorly defined and risks excluding children whose needs do not fit neatly into narrow categories.

As already noted, parents have warned that children with autism, ADHD, high masking behaviours, complex health conditions, and mental health needs are at risk of being overlooked. Parents also stated that the current proposals do not adequately account for highly able neurodiverse children whose difficulties are less visible within mainstream education, and particularly important given the links raised between undiagnosed neurodiversity and later mental health difficulties.

### **Lack of Specialist Support and Funding**

Headteachers also mentioned the lack of specialist provision available across Surrey. Evidence shared by educationalists working in Surrey noted that existing satellite provision was already full, while planned additional places were described as nowhere near sufficient to meet demand.

Participants highlighted that schools are increasingly expected to fill gaps left by other agencies, including mental health support, safeguarding interventions, and broader family support services, including gaps in social care and ASD specialists within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) Without extra resource in these areas too this move into mainstream cannot work.



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Parents and practitioners repeatedly questioned what curriculum, therapeutic input, and specialist expertise would be available within inclusion-based practice, particularly given existing shortages of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and specialist SEND staff. It was raised that some children could become isolated within separate units attached to mainstream schools without receiving genuinely appropriate educational provision.

Families also highlighted the experiences of “SEND-betweeners,” children whose needs are too complex for mainstream settings to meet effectively, but who may not meet thresholds for specialist placements. Parents described these children as particularly vulnerable to falling through gaps in the system and warned that the reforms do not currently provide sufficient clarity around how their needs would be met.

Mental health was one of the most significant themes raised during the consultation. Parents expressed concern that mental health is not mentioned in the White Paper, despite being central to many children’s experiences.

Families and educators in Esher and Walton have made it clear that reform is needed, but it must be child-centred, needs-led, and properly resourced. Parents and children must be listened to, legal rights must be protected, specialist provision must remain accessible, and schools must be realistically supported to deliver inclusion effectively.

In conclusion, while I am supportive of the proposals for inclusion and earlier intervention in principle, the proposed reforms must be adequately funded and resourced, accountability must be baked into the system, and children must have their right to a full education protected.

I look forward to further engagement as these proposals develop.

Yours sincerely,

**Monica Harding MP**

Member of Parliament for Esher and Walton