



Moving forward with SEND and inclusion: positive practice and policy options

Special Educational Needs Policy Research Forum Paper: No 51 November 2025

The **Special Educational Needs Policy Forum seminar**, held on **Tuesday 18th November**, took place at a pivotal moment for the sector. With further developments to the long-awaited **SEND White Paper** still pending, schools, local authorities and policymakers were operating in a climate of uncertainty, rising demand and increasing pressure on both funding and accountability systems. The seminar therefore offered a timely opportunity to examine the policy landscape, explore emerging priorities, and consider evidence-informed approaches that could support more equitable and sustainable provision.

Across the day, contributors addressed three interconnected themes that were expected to shape future national direction:

- **Funding in mainstream settings** – examining how pupils with SEND were being supported within existing resource constraints, with insights from local authority leaders and educational psychologists.
- **Accountability** – considering how accountability mechanisms might better reflect inclusion, partnership and outcomes for children and families.
- **Resourced provision** – exploring the role, design and impact of specialist and hybrid models, drawing on research, system leadership and practice from across the country.

Through keynote inputs, case studies and structured group discussions, the seminar generated practical, realistic ways forward for **schools, settings and policymakers**. The day concluded with a plenary session that synthesised key messages and identified shared priorities for the next phase of SEND policy development.

Speakers

Peter Gray Co-lead of the SEN Policy Research Forum

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Annamarie Hassall CEO, nasen

Brian Lamb Visiting Professor of SEND, University of Derby; NatSIP Associate

Julie Wharton Co-lead of the SEN Policy Research Forum and Senior Lecturer, University of Winchester

Vasilis Strogilos Associate Professor, University of Southampton

Phillipa Sherlock Lewis CEO, Prince Albert Community Trust

Sumayya Patel Head of Prince Albert School, Birmingham

This policy paper summarises some of the speakers' presentations and the plenary discussion involving all attendees. PowerPoint slides of the speakers' presentation can be downloaded from the Forum website.

About the SEN Policy Research Forum

The SEN Policy Research Forum contributes intelligent analysis, knowledge and experience to promote the development of policy and practice for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), from 0-25 years, across the UK.

Our membership includes academics, researchers, policy consultants, advocates and representatives from local authorities and voluntary organisations. We host regular, open [policy seminars](#) on SEND-related topics.

The proceedings are written up into [policy papers](#) and published on our website. For more information on the Forum, [our funding and leadership](#), and our [blog](#), please visit senpolicyresearchforum.co.uk. To join the Forum, please [email](#) us via the website.

Supporting and funding pupils in mainstream schools and settings

Introduction: Peter Gray

Kirklees Cluster Communities: working together to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND in mainstream schools

Jo-Anne Sanders (Director for Education and Early Support) & Jayne Whitton (Principal EP): Kirklees MBC

Background

Kirklees is a large metropolitan borough council with around 180 state-funded schools. It has traditionally been relatively inclusive with an emphasis on support and provision in mainstream schools and settings but, like many Local Authorities (LAs), has experienced increasing demand for specialist provision. This has led to a significant overspend on its High Needs budget, which is partly associated with this being lower than average for similar Authorities. Kirklees has been part of the previous Government's Safety Valve programme since 2021.

Despite these financial pressures and a difficult and challenging national context, Kirklees has maintained a strong commitment to meeting children's needs. It has been brave and innovative in its approach, with a recognition that traditional ways of working may not lead to the best results. In particular, we have been keen to work together more effectively with our schools, parents and partner agencies to achieve common goals. Our maxims include a commitment to positive change ('if not us, then who; if not now, then when?') and a recognition that this will be gradual so that we take people with us ('evolution, not revolution').

Our SEND strategy ('The Big Plan') has set out to achieve the following:

- Responsive and holistic early intervention
- Culture of trust with parents and families
- Inclusive practice in the community and within education settings
- Children and young people thriving in education settings and celebrating their holistic outcomes and achievements
- An integrated system
- Embedding a strong culture of proactivity, holistic skills and knowledge
- Supporting children to have clear aspirations with a focus on preparing for adulthood

The development of our mainstream cluster system

Around 3 years ago, we commissioned Peter Gray (Strategic Services for Children and Young People) to undertake a review of our approach to funding and supporting pupils in mainstream schools and settings. We wanted a system that:

- Achieved better outcomes for children and young people
- Improved the capacity of schools to meet pupil needs
- Supported greater consistency and quality in the mainstream offer
- Was associated with greater equity rather than 'who shouts loudest'
- Targeted those pupils who were most in need
- Avoided unnecessary bureaucracy
- Was financially sustainable

In considering the potential role of mainstream clusters in helping to achieve these objectives, we worked with Peter and alongside a task and finish group of school leaders, SENDCOs, our Parent Carer Forum and Learning Service professionals to identify some key principles:

- A commitment to meeting needs in the cluster area and achieving best possible outcomes
- Prioritising the greatest need vs advocating for one's own school
- Willingness to support and challenge (and be supported and challenged)
- Recognition of the impact of contextual factors not just levels of pupil need
- Active participation even when schools don't have an immediate need for support
- Effective use of all available budgets (delegated and devolved)
- Commitment to promoting independence and reducing reliance on additional resources over time so that these can be reallocated where necessary
- Recognition of the need to respond to contingencies as they arise (and ensure that capacity for this is available)
- Willingness to share good practice with/learn from other clusters
- Commitment to equity/positive outcomes across the area/borough as a whole

Clusters can be defined as groups of mainstream schools in the same geographical community that work together as a team to make sure that children and young people with SEND and their families get the right support at the right time. To do this SENDCOs from each school in the cluster meet regularly together and with other professionals, our Team around the Cluster to share ideas, knowledge, expertise and resources. As well as discussing individual and group needs in their schools, they have access to additional funding to help meet the needs of children in their community.

Schools are able to share information, knowledge and resources with each other quickly so they can identify needs at the earliest opportunity. This means that children and young people who need it can get the right help sooner – preventing small issues from developing into bigger ones. Working together effectively means that there is improved and more consistent support across the area.

Our model took some time to develop so that all partners understood and ‘owned’ the new system. Following initial presentations to heads and SENDCos, to school governors/CEOs of local trusts, to parents and local services, the LA convened a working group to consider how the model would best work in our context. We were lucky to have some excellent volunteers!

We now have 17 clusters linked to different school localities and organised into 4 areas. Each cluster meets at least half-termly. There is a set agenda which includes consideration of individual pupil needs, group, school and cluster issues and administration/finance. For individual/group matters, there is a formal request, discussion and action planning process. Individual requests are presented anonymously (to address GDPR concerns) and there is a requirement for informed consent from parents. Allocations are decided through a voting system, with reasons provided. Each cluster has a budget for the year which is based on demographic need¹.

We have given a lot of thought to cluster leadership. At present, each cluster has a ‘cluster lead’ (one of the SENDCos who is given one day per week release time to perform this function). We have also created two permanent posts, our Area Cluster Leads, to provide overall support and direction for cluster leads and help ensure consistency of practice.

Another important element is the creation of ‘team around the cluster’. These include Educational Psychology, Outreach and Early Years Support, SEND casework officers and business support and early intervention (Families Together). This has helped improve and strengthen school/LA relationships (‘we’re all in this together’), ensure a range of expertise, knowledge and experience and efficiency of communication/greater transparency. It also provides a shared understanding of key issues and needs and gaps in provision, and helps build greater capacity across the system.

¹ Using traditional formula indicators (low prior attainment, social disadvantage, cluster size)

Links to the statutory process

Our new cluster communities are not a replacement for the statutory assessment process and schools/parents can still request this. However, we believe that Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) will become less necessary over time as support and funding becomes more accessible. In the meantime, we are keen to ensure that both routes lead to similar outcomes, so there is equity across the system. We have developed cluster funding dashboards which show

- How many children and young people are being funded in each school and at what cost
- The number of EHCPs in each school
- Each school's notional SEND budget

This helps to provide transparency and a better picture of how much funding schools are already receiving when new requests are being considered.

Evaluation so far

We have recently undertaken a systematic review of outcomes relating to the key strategic aims of the new system. The school cluster leads have reported the following:

- A greater sense of collective responsibility for pupils with SEND in our area, from early years to primary and to secondary and beyond
- Improved access to relevant services
- Greater collaboration with/support from the range of 'experts'
- Better use of the resources available in school and beyond (Kirklees offer; graduated approach; training etc)
- Improved outcomes for learners with SEND
- Early intervention without the need for a formal needs assessment
- Effective use of allocated funding

School SENDCOs see clusters as providing a forum that offers

- Sharing of good practice and ideas
- Collaborative problem solving
- Access to 'team around the cluster' expertise
- Transition planning and consistency across schools
- Training and CPD opportunities
- Funding support

In our recent survey, 92% of SENDCOs reported that clusters were having a positive impact on their practice. 90% said that they were having a positive impact on children and young people with SEND.

Other evidence supports positive SENDCo engagement (high levels of attendance and participation) and impact on practice and outcomes. It also confirms better use of advice and guidance from local services and clearer/more consistent expectations of provision that should be 'ordinarily available'. Schools have been challenged to think and work in different ways. There are numerous positive references to 'sharing best practice'; 'sharing resources' and 'building capacity'.

SENDCos are more confident in participating in meetings and feel more supported/less isolated. There is evidence that phase transitions have improved. There is an increased understanding of relative need and the importance of common thresholds for accessing funding and support. However, schools are also recognising the pressures and challenges associated with different school contexts (eg large urban vs smaller less disadvantaged settings). A number of common themes and interventions/resources are being identified that can benefit a broader set of schools in the cluster. At cluster lead level, there are regular discussions around inclusivity and approaches that can address inconsistencies.

There are a number of positive reports of improved child and family experience, for example:

'The child and parent have had further access to holistic professional support. He has an ongoing adapted curriculum which is supported by senior leadership due to specialist advice. Parents have stated that they can see ongoing improvements in attendance, engagement and emotional resilience. For example, the child was below 60% attendance previously, was categorised as 'persistently absent' in 2023-24 and is now above 90%.'

A sample taken from 18 individual cases discussed in one cluster showed an average improvement in school confidence in meeting needs from 3.5/10 to 8.2/10.

We intend to carry out further evaluations next year drawing more specifically on parental and service experience.

Clusters and future national policy

We consider that our approach is consistent with the 5 principles recently set out to guide national development by the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson:

- Early
- Local
- Fair

- Effective
- Shared

We hope that future national policy will support continuation of our work. In the meantime, we are starting to link with other LAs in our region that are also engaged in this kind of model, so that we can share and learn from best practice.

The Role of Inclusion Bases (SEN Units and Resourced Provisions²) in the Department for Education's Strategy on SEND Reform

Brian Lamb, Visiting Professor of SEND, University of Derby; NatSIP Associate

A key element of the Department for Education's (DfE's) response to the crisis in the SEND system is to develop a more inclusive mainstream offer. In doing so they are also seeking to improve outcomes for children, prevent the continued growth in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) which are the key means to secure legal rights to services, reverse the growth in special school placements and the rising costs of independent special school provision³. This paper examines how the emerging strategy of increasing the number and role of Inclusion Bases, currently SEN units and Resource Provisions (RPs), became a central plank of the SEND reform strategy and how administrative data and research can help interrogate this strategy.

Section 1. Development of the Policy on Inclusion Bases

As part of the ongoing debate about the proposed SEND reforms during 2025 the DfE, in their written evidence to the Education Select Committee, signalled a growing emphasis on the role of SEN Units and RPs stating they would;

*Sec 164 "...encourage schools (and LAs) to set up resourced provisions and SEN Units to increase capacity in mainstream schools. We will work with the sector to extend best practice across the system, including how SEN Units and resourced provision can promote greater inclusion."*⁴

² This paper was developed from a presentation for the SEND policy forum given before the DfE published its White Paper and SEND Consultation. As all of the administrative and other data referred to here use the old descriptors, I have used those unless referring explicitly to the DfE announcements and the new concept of Inclusion Bases but use the terms interchangeably otherwise.

³ SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First. Government Consultation Feb 2026.

⁴ Written evidence submitted by Department for Education
https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/137777/html/#_Toc189742889

The Education Committee responded in its Report⁵ with a number of challenges and recommendations for the DfE if they were going to pursue this strategy;

Sec 304 “...the expansion of resource bases within mainstream settings must be accompanied by greater clarity on good practice, improvements in training, teaching and accountability measures. We also received evidence suggesting that the proliferation of resource bases could amplify the “othering” of children and young people with SEND, segregating them from mainstream classrooms.”

Sec 305. “...If the Department for Education expands the use of resource bases to increase specialist provision within mainstream schools and multiacademy trusts, it must set out a detailed implementation plan. This plan should clearly specify how resource bases should be staffed, including required qualifications, expertise, and staff-to-pupil ratios to ensure all children with SEND receive appropriate support. The Department must also define mandatory standards of good practice for resource bases, covering physical facilities and equipment and good practice approaches to integration with the wider school or multiacademy trust community.”

New guidance on Inclusion Bases

The Education Committees’ concerns reflect the current absence of a standard model of provision for SEN units and RPs nationally and very variable practice in how they are organised, managed and integrated into mainstream provisions. In an apparent response to the call by the Education Committee for more consistency and standards for the DfE announced (Oct 6th 2025) that they were commissioning “best practice” guidance from the National Children’s Bureau (NCB) as the lead partner working with the sector⁶. There are already several SEND specific guides for bases including for Hearing Impairment⁷ and Speech and Language⁸ and aspects of physical structure are currently covered in a building bulletin from 2015⁹. A toolkit to support inclusion in RPs was co-produced with a number of provisions following research by Southampton University¹⁰. The guidance will not be statutory and so it is debatable if it will have the

⁵ Solving the SEND Crisis Education Select Committee 18th September 2025.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/209313/solving-the-send-crisis-report-calls-for-culture-shift-and-funding-to-make-mainstream-education-genuinely-inclusive/>

⁶ Schools Week, 6th October 2025. Ruth Lucas. ‘Best practice’ guidance promised for SEN units’.

<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/best-practice-guidance-promised-for-sen-units/>

⁷ NatSIP. Quality Standards for Resource Provisions (2020). <https://www.natsip.org.uk/doc-library-login/quality-improvement-for-services/quality-standards-for-resource-provisions-for-deaf-children-and-young-people-in-mainstream-schools>

⁸ Speech and Language UK 2026. Specialist resourced speech and language provisions Guidance on specialist resourced provision for speech and language challenges in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England.

⁹ Area Guidelines for SEND Alternative Provision. Building Guidelines 104. 2015. DfE.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/area-guidelines-for-send-and-alternative-provision-bb-104>

¹⁰ Vasilis Strogilos et al., 2023. Inclusive Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities. A Resourced Provision Toolkit. University of Southampton.

effect the Select Committee was hoping for when they called for “*mandatory standards of good practice for resource bases*”.

There is also limited research evidence on the effectiveness and outcomes achieved by SEN units and RPs in England ¹¹. Some studies have recorded positive experiences for children and parents relating to Autism¹² and Speech and Language ¹³. The DfE is also retrospectively commissioning research into SEN Units and RPs ¹⁴. It is not clear yet if these types of standards would be incorporated into the proposed national Inclusion Standards or other guidance.

Funding for additional provision.

In late 2024 and early 2025 the DfE had already committed £740 million to capital projects with the aim of creating more resource bases and specialist provision ¹⁵. This included an explicit recommendation that the funding should be spent on expanding SEN Unit and RP provision within mainstream to create 10,000 additional placements. An announcement from the DfE (11 December, 2025), on the same day that Education Committee published the DfE response to its recommendations, confirmed the expansion of specialist provision with £3 billion capital funding covering the period from 2026/27 to 2029/30. The aim of the funding is to create 50,000 new places ¹⁶. The DfE also reiterated the policy intention that;

“Many mainstream settings are delivering specialist provision locally through SEN units and resourced provision. These specialist facilities attached to mainstream schools can deliver bespoke support, adapted to pupils’ needs and close to their home....We would like to explore how we can make similar practices widespread, not only to improve

¹¹Vasilis Strogilos, Rebecca J. Ward Resourced provision in mainstream schools for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities: Inclusive service or safe space? JORSEN Volume24, Issue1 January 2024 Pages 161-174 <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12622>

¹² Warren, A., Buckingham, K. & Parsons, S. (2020) Everyday experiences of inclusion in primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 36(5), 803–818. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2020.18231> Holt, L., Lea, J. & Bowlby, S. (2012) Special units for young people on the autistic spectrum in mainstream schools: Sites of normalisation, abnormalisation, inclusion, and exclusion. *Environment & Planning A*, 44(9), 2191–2206. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1068/a44456>

¹³ Lindsay, G., Ricketts, J., Peacey, L.V., Dockrell, J.E. & Charman, T. (2016) Meeting the educational and social needs of children with language impairment or autism spectrum disorder: the parents’ perspectives. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 51(5), 495–507. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1460-6984.12226>

¹⁴ Georgia Gould, Hansard 13 Feb. <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2026-01-07.103940.h&s=%E2%80%9Cdisabled+children%E2%80%9D#g103940.r0>

¹⁵DfE announcement 4th December 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-specialist-places-to-be-created-in-mainstream-schools> and again DfE 27th March 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/740-million-allocated-for-10000-new-places-for-pupils-with-send>

¹⁶DfE Press Release, 11th December 2025. £3bn investment to end postcode lottery for children with SEND <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/3bn-investment-to-end-postcode-lottery-for-children-with-send>

*SEND provision in mainstream, but to deepen the relationship between mainstream and specialist schools.”*¹⁷

This was then added to on the 11th of Feb 2026 with an announcement by Briget Phillipson, Secretary of State for Education, in respect of the schools’ estates strategy in which promised that; *“As part of the drive to make schools more inclusive by design, the government expects that every secondary school will, in time, have an inclusion base – a dedicated safe space away from busy classrooms where pupils can access targeted support that bridges the gap between mainstream and specialist provision”*¹⁸

The White Paper and SEND Consultation

The publication of the DfE White Paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving¹⁹ and the accompanying consultation SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First confirmed the proposals laid out in the Estates Strategy and provided more context. The designation of Inclusion Bases will replace the current SEN Unit and RPs categories. The Inclusion Bases will be; *“Embedded within mainstream settings, bases will offer bespoke learning environments and flexible access to specialist education or health support where needed, helping children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.....*

*These bases will have specialisms, providing tailored and expert teaching and support for specific groups of children and young people – such as those with complex SEND”*²⁰

Inclusion Bases will be divided into two different forms of provision;

Support Bases; providing Targeted Support funded by the setting or MAT out of their budgets.

Specialist Bases; providing specialist support funded by the LA.

It was confirmed that every Secondary School would be expected to have a Support Base with an “*equivalent number*” of places in primary schools. This would allow for a significant shift away from special school provision and that;

“By 2035 we expect that the proportion of school children in a specialist placement will be higher than it is now, but that more of them – around a quarter – will be in commissioned Specialist Bases in mainstream schools. This rise in numbers of children

¹⁷ Education Committee 11th December 2025. Government Response. Page 14.

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/50714/documents/277769/default/>

¹⁸ DfE. Press Release 11th Feb 2026. 10-year plan to revitalise schools and colleges for every child

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/10-year-plan-to-revitalise-schools-and-colleges-for-every-child>

¹⁹ DfE. 2026. Every Child Achieving and Thriving.

²⁰ DfE. SEND Consultation p54.

*in Specialist Bases will mean that the proportion placed in special schools will return to around today's levels by 2035.”*²¹

The new guidance for Inclusion Bases, noted earlier, will inform Ofsted benchmarks when inspecting settings and a new data collection measure will record which settings are operating a base and the children accessing it to provide more oversight²².

The new definition broadly mirrors the current one in which SEN units cater for more specialist support within the unit and RPs where at least 50% of the time is spent within the mainstream setting. It is not clear how significant a change the establishment of Support Bases will be for many schools as according to a survey for Teacher Tapp 86 per cent of headteachers had a base in school to “*make additional arrangements and/or teach different curricula*” for small groups of pupils for some or all of the day²³. Though these may not be the formal provisions envisaged by the DfE they could form the basis of further expansion of bases.

Strategically the Inclusion Bases will fit into a broader ecology of additional support into mainstream which will include Experts at Hand where specialists including Educational Psychologists (EPs), Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) and specialist teachers will be available to provide support with additional funding of £1.8 million over three years²⁴. Each school will also have to have an Inclusion Plan monitored by Ofsted which will replace the current School Information Report and which will also cover any Inclusion Base provision within the school.

Section 2. What do we know about SEN Units and RPs?

There is a significant amount of administrative data, surveys and other research which can be used to scope out the current terrain around SEN Units and RPs. These also provide a context to explore some of the issues raised in the policy debate and interrogate current assumptions in respect of Government aspirations and expectations for Inclusion Bases.

DfE data.

DfE capacity data identifies that at May 2025 there was capacity for 1,920 mainstream schools (local authority maintained and academies); with the majority of these in primary 1,260, and 610 in secondary, and 40 all-through schools. This equated to 10,000 places in SEN units in mainstream schools; 6,900 primary places and 3,100 secondary places. There were 22,000 places in resourced provision in mainstream

²¹ DfE. SEND Consultation p74.

²² DfE. SEND Consultation p55.

²³ Schools Week 13 Feb 2026. Ruth Lucas. ‘Inclusion base’ for every school – but who will pay?

<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/inclusion-base-for-every-school-but-who-will-pay/>

²⁴ DfE. SEND Consultation p57

schools; 13,000 primary places and 9,000 secondary places ²⁵. While this represents an increase on the previous year the provision of formal bases covers a very small proportion of primary and secondary mainstream schools in England overall ²⁶.

Analysis of the capacity figures by Education Data Lab for TES magazine also show that SEN Units and RPs are very unevenly distributed with 13.8% of London primaries having one, compared with just 4.3 per cent in the East Midlands and 5.4 in the South West. In secondary schools around 25% in the South East 24.1 per cent in the North East and 23.5 per cent in Yorkshire and the Humber have formal bases - compared with just 12 per cent in the Midlands, 12.6 per cent in the East Midlands and 12 per cent in the West Midlands ²⁷. It is difficult to tell how far regional differences related to population differences or policy choices but they do confirm an uneven geographical distribution of current provision.

Analysis of the DfE figures by Education Data Lab²⁸ for those children with EHCPs in 2024 by their primary SEN type and placement shows that numerically children with Autism, Speech and Language Development (SPLD), Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) diagnosis make up the largest categories of EHCP recipients at primary and also at secondary with SEMH and SPLD reversing position at secondary school and moderate learning difficulties substantially increasing numbers at secondary. However relatively they have less places in bases compared to some lower incidence groups. For example, while children with hearing impairment represent just 1% of all children with EHCPs, they represent 22% of placements in SRPs and 4% of pupils in SEN units in Primary.

²⁵ DfE. School Capacity 2024-25. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-capacity/2024-25> The School Capacity data appears to be the most reliable way of accounting for the number of bases but the Schools Census and Get Information about Schools database give different numbers and depending which of those sources was used will give different numbers in some of the following analysis I have used here.

²⁶DfE. 2025. Schools, pupils and their characteristics

²⁷ TES 27th March. John Roberts. Revealed: The DfE's 'enormous' challenge with inclusion bases. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/difficulty-putting-inclusion-bases-in-every-school-send-reforms>

²⁸ Where do we need more provision for pupils with EHC plans? FFL Education data lab <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2025/03/where-do-we-need-more-provision-for-pupils-with-ehc-plans/>

Table 1. Placement of Pupils with EHCPs, by placement and type of need. Jan 2024 produced by Education Data Lab.

Placement of pupils with EHC plans by primary need, January 2024									
Phase	Primary need	Mainstream Schools			Special	AP	LA AP	All	Pupils
		SRPs	SEN unit	Other					
Primary	Autistic Spectrum disorder	6%	3%	53%	34%	0%	3%	35%	71683
	Hearing impairment	22%	4%	57%	15%	c	c	1%	3000
	Moderate learning difficulties	2%	2%	70%	22%	0%	3%	6%	11732
	Multisensory impairment	3%	c	71%	22%	c	2%	0%	683
	Physical disability	4%	c	72%	21%	c	2%	4%	7151
	Profound and multiple learning difficulties	2%	c	22%	74%	c	1%	2%	5058
	Social, emotional and mental health needs	2%	1%	69%	18%	2%	7%	12%	25315
	Speech, language and communication needs	4%	3%	77%	14%	0%	2%	26%	52331
	Severe learning difficulties	1%	1%	15%	82%	c	c	7%	14261
	Specific learning difficulty (dyslexia)	2%	c	77%	18%	c	2%	3%	7022
	Visual impairment	5%	c	73%	20%	c	1%	1%	1707
Other	3%	1%	71%	22%	0%	3%	2%	3953	
Secondary	Autistic Spectrum disorder	4%	1%	38%	44%	1%	12%	31%	61974
	Hearing impairment	14%	c	55%	28%	c	3%	1%	2968
	Moderate learning difficulties	2%	1%	45%	45%	1%	7%	11%	21462
	Multisensory impairment	c	c	57%	33%	c	6%	0%	535
	Physical disability	4%	0%	57%	34%	0%	5%	3%	6521
	Profound and multiple learning difficulties	c	c	9%	89%	c	2%	2%	3435
	Social, emotional and mental health needs	1%	0%	45%	30%	4%	20%	23%	46009
	Speech, language and communication needs	4%	1%	56%	31%	1%	7%	13%	26391
	Severe learning difficulties	1%	c	8%	88%	c	2%	6%	12861
	Specific learning difficulty (dyslexia)	3%	1%	69%	19%	1%	7%	5%	10341
	Visual impairment	6%	c	65%	25%	c	4%	1%	1857
	Other	2%	0%	57%	34%	2%	6%	2%	4586

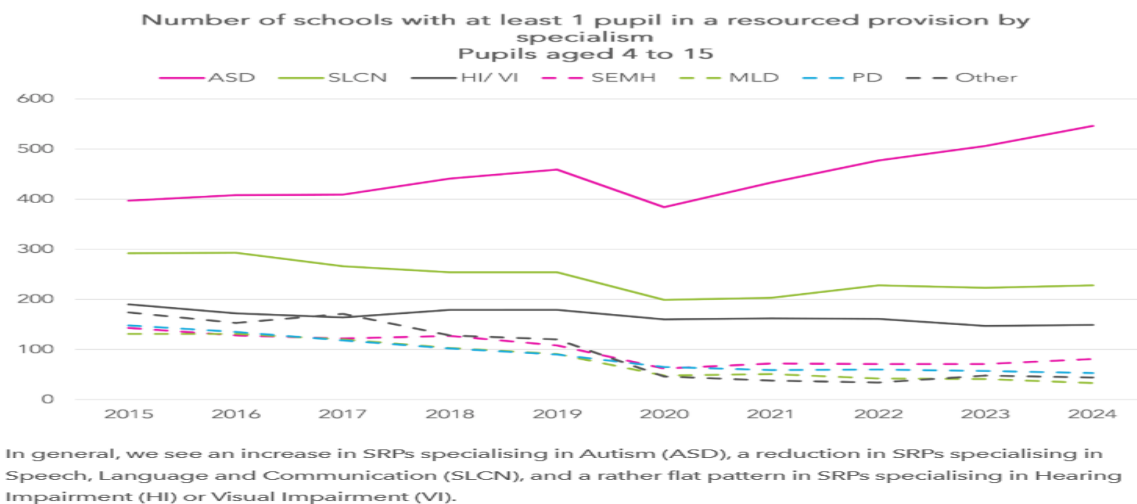
Notes

c- data suppressed to preserve confidentiality

In secondary schools 14% are placed in RPs. This shows the importance of resource provisions for deaf children and young people. For Vision Impairment there is a similar picture with 5% of those with EHCPs at primary being supported in an SRP and 6% at secondary. For children who numerically make up a much larger proportion of SEND need it is not surprising that they make up a smaller proportion of numbers in bases compared to other groups though that proportion is likely to grow given current trends in the expansion of provision.

Looking at the overall trend, the Education Data Lab summary of DfE figures shows that there has been an expansion of RPs specialising in ASD and a reduction in others while showing VI and HI broadly flat to declining slightly.

Table 2. Number of Schools with at least one pupil in a Resource Provision by SEND category (Education Data Lab).



The growth in other types of resource provision for ASD is consistent with analysis by Matt Keer for Special Needs Jungle (SNJ) on the DfE capital grant expenditure which showed that “over 70% of new SEND unit and resource base places funded through this grant are being funnelled towards ASD and social, emotional and mental health needs, with virtually nothing for less common types of SEN and Disability.”²⁹

Destinations of those in SEND Units and RPs

Analysis by Education Data Lab of DfE figures³⁰ looked at pupils placed in SEN Units and RPs who were aged 10 (Year 6) in 2019, and what type of school attended at age 15 (Year 11) in 2024 as most pupils reach the end of Key Stage 4 at this age. They found that; “among those who attended a SRP or SEN unit at age 10, the most common destination was a special school (43% and 50% respectively). 16% of pupils who attended a SRP at 10 also did so age 15.”

²⁹Matt Keer. May 30th 2025. Special Needs Jungle. Now you see them, now you don’t: The curious case of the vanishing resource bases and SEN units

<https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/vanishing-resource-bases-sen-units> See also Matt Keer <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/how-councils-spent-2-6-billion-government-send-funding/>

³⁰ Where do we need more provision for pupils with EHC plans? FFL Education data lab

<https://ffleducationdatalab.org.uk/2025/03/where-do-we-need-more-provision-for-pupils-with-ehc-plans/>

Table 3. Destinations of pupils with EHCPs aged 10-2018/19 (Education Data Lab).

End of Year 11 destinations of pupils with EHC plans aged 10 in 2018/19									
School attended in Year 6	End of Key Stage 4 destination								
	Resourced Provision	SEN unit	Other mainstream	Special	State AP	Independent	Other	None	Total
Resourced Provision	16%	c	28%	43%	c	5%	3%	3%	1036
SEN unit	9%	8%	21%	50%	c	6%	3%	c	642
Other mainstream	5%	1%	52%	29%	1%	5%	3%	4%	11857
Special	c	c	2%	87%	0%	2%	3%	4%	8830
AP	c	0%	8%	41%	8%	18%	14%	c	194

The current operation of SEN Units and RPs therefore suggests that the DfE hope of them acting as means of retaining children in mainstream is the opposite of what currently happens when those children transfer to secondary school. A significant proportion of the growth in EHCPs has been for young children. This suggests that there will be large cohorts of children with EHCPs yet to transfer to secondary school with an EHCP from SEN Units and RPs who will continue to be placed in special schools unless additional mainstream specialist provision is put in place.

Transfer to secondary education often provokes a change in provision where secondary schools cannot provide the same level of support for pupils and the more challenging physical and social environment creates challenges, especially for children with Autism and ADHD. This is reflected in a spike in applications for EHCPs for children at age 10 with aim of ensuring more specialist provision ³¹. It may also reflect parents' concerns that SEN units and RPs have been used to "hold" ³² children without providing the specialist support feeding into a preference to select special schools at secondary transfer ³³. Especially given Data Labs conclusion that; *"In some areas in particular, there are relatively large numbers of secondary-aged young people with EHC plans for ASD or SEMH for whom there is no suitable provision in the state-funded school estate."*

³⁴

The requirement outlined in the Consultation document to review EHCPs on transfer to secondary may be seeking to identify and then secure appropriate provision at the secondary phase. Prioritizing secondary school bases suggests that the DfE has recognized that the current distribution of SEN Units and RPs do not meet SEND needs at secondary school. The scale of the change is indicated by DfE's own predictions

³¹DfE. 2025. Education, health and care plans. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans/2025>

³² Contact. SEN Units and Resource Bases Briefing-England Only. 2025. Joe Crowley, Charles Wilson, Line Knudsen, Nicky McGuinness and Gayle Munro, National Centre for Social Research SEND Futures: parental perceptions of school support for pupils with SEND at age 13-14 September 2024. DfE.

³³ See also for AP provision; Emma Simpson and Cristin O'Brien. What works: Four Tenets of Effective Internal Alternative Provision. The Difference. 2025. <https://the-difference.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/What-Works-Four-Tenets-of-Effective-Internal-Alternative-Provision.pdf>

³⁴ Where do we need more provision for pupils with EHC plans? FFL Education data lab. 27th March 2025. <https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2025/03/where-do-we-need-more-provision-for-pupils-with-ehc-plans/>

where they are only anticipating a return to the current level of special school provision by 2035, despite predicting an expansion of those placed in specialist bases by a quarter in that time.

There is significant churn in the number of resource bases and SEN Units.

Analysis of DfE figures from Matt Keer for SNJ ³⁵ shows that from 2021 to 2024 363 new resource bases have been opened and 223 have closed or merged with other provisions. While the overall number of bases has grown there are significant changes in the number of provisions locally in some areas. However, as Keer concludes it is not possible from these figures to arrive at any overall conclusions about why there is this level of fluctuation.

This churn in provision questions the stability and cohesiveness of Inclusion Bases as a foundation for improving inclusion without additional planning and support. Much may depend on the broader strategic arrangements that the DfE has envisaged in the consultation paper including encouraging local strategic SEND partnerships to develop joint working across a number of schools, MATs and other education provisions. This is seen as vital to ensure strategic planning of resources including specialist support and the “*commissioning of Specialist Bases*” ³⁶. To aid this further DfE are also proposing schools work in local groups to improve SEND provision across their area which would also include the development of specialist resources and Alternative Provision ³⁷. Local planning would also allow for more strategic allocation of resources where there are uneven levels of need, for example in low incidence SEND.

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) Report

The NFER looked at the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools and especially the proportions with EHCPs in schools. They divided schools between those with higher proportions of pupils with EHCPs as compared to both their catchment area and nationally, referred to as ‘high EHCP’ schools (HES) and a second group which they identified as having higher-than-expected numbers of pupils with SEN Support and/or EHCPs ‘high-any-SEND schools’ (HASS) ³⁸.

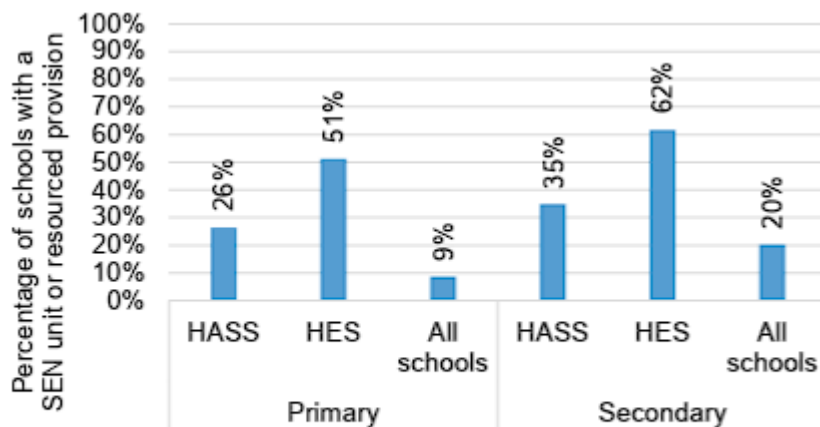
³⁵ SNJ. Matt Keer. May 30th 2025. Now you see them, now you don’t: The curious case of the vanishing resource bases and SEN units. SNJ. <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/vanishing-resource-bases-sen-units/>

³⁶ DfE. SEND Consultation p89

³⁷ DfE. SEND Consultation p90

³⁸ Tang, S., Julius, J., Walker, M. and Classick, R. (2025). High-SEND Schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England’s mainstream schools. Slough: NFER

Table 4. Proportions of HASS and HES with SEN Unit or RP 2023/4. (NFER)



Source: NFER analysis

In the HES schools they found it was more likely to have a SEN unit or RP. Whilst only nine per cent of mainstream primary schools and 20 per cent of secondary schools have a SEN unit or RP, over half of the HES group have this kind of provision, with 51 per cent of primary HES and 62 per cent of secondary HES. As they note *“This is not surprising given these schools will have pupils with EHCPs in those units.”*³⁹ However, even when they removed all pupils in SEN Units and RPs in the HES group from the analysis approximately two fifths of primary schools and half of secondaries with a SEN unit or RP in the original HES group were still identified as ‘high-SEND’. This indicates that many schools with SEN Units and RPs have above-average proportions of pupils with EHCPs, over and above the pupils enrolled in this specialist provision. They concluded that pattern of provision for SEND resource provision between HES and HASS schools is also related to a number of complex factors that they identify including how SEND is identified, as well as differences in local context and pupil intakes between different schools.

An analysis of the next stage of the research also found that for schools with an SEN unit or RP around two thirds agreed that this provision enhanced their overall capacity and expertise to support a wide range of SEND. Of the remaining third less than 10 per cent of primary and secondary schools explicitly disagreed with this statement with around a quarter who were neither positive or negative. They also noted that only a third of secondary schools and fewer than half of primary schools said they felt their inclusion base could meet the needs of all pupils who accessed it ⁴⁰.

There were also mixed views on how well bases ensure inclusion. The research found that two-thirds of primary schools felt pupils attending the base were well integrated

³⁹ Ibid p21.

⁴⁰ Sarah Tang and Matt Walker. 6 March 2026. Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis? <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/blogs/can-inclusion-bases-provide-part-of-the-solution-to-the-send-crisis/>

into mainstream lessons and activities and this increased to just under 80 per cent at secondary school. However, in around a quarter of schools with an existing base; pupils were reported to have limited interaction or friendships with peers outside the provision. Fewer than half of the bases felt they had sufficient specialist expertise to meet pupils' needs ⁴¹. This will add to concerns about the capacity of some SEN units and RPs to provide specialist support necessary for pupils and an inclusive environment.

School and College Voice Survey.

The DfE conduct regular omnibus surveys of school and college teachers and leaders on various issues. For the April 2025 survey they asked a number of questions on SEN Units and RPs ⁴². They found that a significant number of units that are run directly by the schools but not recognised by the LA with 25% in Primary and 27% in secondary. Also, that 65% of primary and 46% of secondary schools had no SEN units.

In respect of the staff employed within the SEN units and RPs that are LA recognised it is interesting that for primary 73% said they employed specialist teachers while for secondary this rose to 85%. The figures show that 41% at primary and 46% at secondary employed teachers without a specialism. As a major justification for SEN units and RPs is access to more specialist support it at least raises the question of why the number of specialist staff is not higher. The lack of specialists also reflects some parental concerns in other studies where parents have complained that the specialist support in SEN Units is not always available or not comparable to that offered in special schools ⁴³. Again, this will be an issue for the new "Inclusion Bases" to address in terms of what levels of staffing and expertise are required by guidance.

For SEN units and RPs that are not LA recognised the numbers of non-specialists across all areas of types of staff are greater than the recognised ones in most provisions.

⁴¹ Sarah Tang and Matt Walker Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis?
<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/blogs/can-inclusion-bases-provide-part-of-the-solution-to-the-send-crisis/>

⁴²DfE. School and college voice: April 2025
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025/school-and-college-voice-april-2025#sec-SEN-units>

⁴³ Contact. 2025. SEN Units and Resource Bases Briefing-England Only.

Table 5. Teachers and Support Staff with specialisms in SEN Units and RPs (Omnibus Survey)

Figure 8: What types of staff work within schools' SEN units or Resourced Provisions that are not LA-recognised

[Change to chart view](#)

Response	Primary	Secondary
Teaching assistants with specific specialisms in SEND	56%	78%
Teaching assistants who are non-specialists in SEND	67%	70%
Teachers with a SEND specialism	35%	62%
Teachers without a SEND specialism	30%	49%
The headteacher or another senior leader	26%	27%
Health staff	13%	27%
Other	3%	6%
Don't know	0%	1%

This picture of a much wider group of schools running non recognised provision is confirmed by NEFR research ⁴⁴ which surveyed 800 senior school leaders and SENCOs and found many schools to be operating inclusion bases, albeit without formal funding or recognition by the LA. Commissioning of Inclusion Bases will need to become more coordinated by SEND partnerships and LAs to address the potentially ad hoc nature of provisions not currently recognised by LAs if the strategy is to work.

SEN units and RPs for Sensory Impairment (SI)

There is more specific data on sensory impairment provision where the low incidence nature of the SEND has necessitated a more strategic response across LAs in developing provision and more granular information on how they operate. The statutory requirement for teachers to have a mandatory advanced qualification to teach children with SI has resulted in LAs maintaining a specialist workforce to meet SI needs. While the Consultation Paper refers to additional funding being committed to ensure more EPs and SLTs there are no similar announcements for other specialist SI teachers with the Mandatory Qualification whose numbers are under pressure ⁴⁵.

The annual CRIDE survey of specialist sensory support teams for deaf children reported that there are 215 RPs in 2025 ⁴⁶. This is a reduction from 220 reported in 2024 and from 260 in 2016. A significant drop in specialist capacity. CRIDE data also highlights significant disparities in RP availability, staffing, and management across regions, as well as challenges in meeting recommended Qualified Teacher of the Deaf (QToD) ratios in ensuring adequate support for deaf children. The reduction in specialist resource

⁴⁴ Sarah Tang and Matt Walker. 6 March 2026. Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis?

⁴⁵ CRIDE 2025. Education provision for deaf children in England in 2024/25

⁴⁶ CRIDE 2025. Education provision for deaf children in England in 2024/25. CRIDE uses the term resource bases to cover both SEN Units and RPs.

bases for deaf children at precisely the time that the DfE is seeking to expand them could derail the strategy, at least for low incidence SEND.

As part of this specialist provision some SEN Units and RPs are directly staffed through the LA SI service or work closely with them. Looking at provisions for deaf children there is a mixed model of management with 138 managed by schools 82 managed directly by LA. Of the provisions 180 of the 220 bases (82%) were managed by a QToD ⁴⁷. There is a very uneven geographical spread of provision with 65% of local authorities have no bases, while 84% of local authorities in the South East have at least one. The model of deaf resource bases is also different as it involves provision of different language routes with 159 using total communication (mixed communication approaches) 57 aural approaches (oral English language) and 21 British Sign Language ⁴⁸.

There is no similar analysis for Vision Impairment (VI) provision independent from DfE sources. However, NatSIP asked via their Heads of Services forum for information about VI units in LAs ⁴⁹. Responses indicated that a number of LAs maintain or support RPs in schools. Funding would appear to be mainly provided centrally by the LA with a number of different models of provision and flexibility of staffing. Some feedback also suggested there are LAs with no specialist SEN units or RPs for VI. This aligns with DfE figures that there are fewer RPs for VI (see above) than HI. Most of these provisions which are known are managed by a QTVI. Within SI provision overall there is also significant use of additional specialist expertise including technology, sound field systems, Hearing Aid and Cochlear Implant maintenance, Braille, or specialist additional staff, Habilitation, Interveners, BSL tutors etc. There may be specially added rooms to aid a good acoustic environment.

Section 3. Policy and Implementation Issues

This review of research and administrative data suggests a number of potential issues that will need to be addressed to make a success of the policy.

What level of specialist provision should be provided?

Given the very different levels of specialist support identified in the data it is important that there are some nationally agreed standards for Inclusion Bases on the number of specialist staff and qualifications for specialist and support bases. For example, the sector guidance for SLT specifies four permanent team members as a minimum within a specialist unit and that the leader should be part of the senior leadership team ⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ NDCS Resource provisions in England: survey of local authorities 2024.

⁴⁸ NDCS Resource provisions in England: survey of local authorities 2024.

⁴⁹ Communication from NatSIP. Feb 2026.

⁵⁰ Speech and Language Therapy UK. 2026. Specialist resourced speech and language provisions Guidance on specialist resourced provision for speech and language challenges in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/SpecialistResourcedProvisionGuidance_Final.pdf

Specialist Provision Packages could include requirements on staffing and levels of expertise in respect of the Specialist Bases. For Support Bases these could be reflected in the schools Inclusion Plan.

Does the specialist base have to be managed by a specialist in that area of SEND?

There are very mixed models of leadership between the LA and Schools and between specialist and non-specialist management of the provisions. It is not clear if there is any consensus if the person leading the SEN Unit or RPs has to be a specialist professional in that area. However, if they are not this will lead to questions about how quality, professional standards and development are supported in the bases.

What is the current capacity in the system to secure specialist support?

There are currently concerns about the under provision of specialist expertise including for SLTs⁵¹, EPs⁵², Autism specialists⁵³ and Sensory Impairment Specialist Teachers⁵⁴, despite DfE committing to investment of £40 million over three years in training more EPs and SLTs⁵⁵. Any strategy that is going to rely on rapid expansion of SEN Units and RPs has to demonstrate where the additional specialist expertise is going to come from and how it is funded given the acknowledged shortfalls of specialist staff. There also needs to be a more coherent and nationally developed workforce plan for specialist support to meet increased demand in mainstream to ensure that the current ad hoc nature of the specialist workforce development does not undermine the strategy.

How will different models of inclusion bases for different types of need work in the new arrangements?

There are clearly different models of intervention and support depending on the type of SEND populations within schools. Placement in specialist bases will depend on eligibility for “*specialist provision packages*” of support⁵⁶, with nationally agreed criteria developed by panels of experts for the specific SEND areas. The current Code of Practice⁵⁷ puts great emphasis on the assessing then meeting the individual needs of the child or young person through a personalized approach. The emphasis on packages of support is a very different concept focused on providing a broad and comprehensive service package such that it could meet any child’s needs within the defined group of

⁵¹ RCSLT. Fail to plan, plan to fail: speech and language therapy workforce planning in England 2023

⁵² DfE. June 2023. Educational psychology services: workforce insights and school perspectives on impact Research report

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/649c4a4406179b00113f7498/Educational_Psychology_services_-_Workforce_insights_and_school_perspectives_on_impact.pdf

⁵³ The Economic Case for Prioritising Autism in Policy and Reform Martin Knapp, Eva Cyhlarova, Nazak Salehi, Edmund Stubbs, Magdalena Walbaum, Shari Jadoolal and Mashal Murad Shah Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC) London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) December 2024 | Report

⁵⁴ CRIDE 2025. Education provision for deaf children in England in 2024/25.

⁵⁵ SEND Consultation p62.

⁵⁶ DfE. SEND Consultation p63-65.

⁵⁷ DfE/NHS Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 025 years. Jan 2015.

children. Until those ‘packages’ have been developed it is difficult to judge how they well they will capture the appropriate level of need and how they will align with current levels of specialist support provided in SEN Units and RPs currently. The quality of those packages and what they secure in terms of specialist provision may in turn may determine how acceptable they will be to parents and meet children’s needs.

How are new resource bases going to funded in a strategic way?

While capital funding is available for both Inclusion Bases and special schools the DfE has strongly encouraged LAs to use the capital grant funding to secure more places in bases with only limited success so far. When offered the choice by DfE of continuing with special school provision or taking money to develop mainstream provisions over half the councils opted for continuing with their special school plans⁵⁸. Demand currently exceeds capacity in Special schools who currently have 11,000 more pupils on roll than reported capacity suggesting that this oversubscription may be driving LA decision making to increase provision⁵⁹. The £740 million capital grant for 2025/6 created around 3,300 places in SEN units and RPs while the rest of investment has mainly been directed to special school places and AP provision according to an analysis by SNJ⁶⁰. While this is a welcome increase in provision it represents less than half the additional placements in bases that the DfE was aiming to create.

The DfE is going to be more directive about the deployment of future funding by requiring LAs to submit local SEND reform plans as part of the agreement for the DfE to “write off” their historic SEND deficit’s up to 90% of the total. This will include LAs not being able to get the top grading for the plans if they do not show how they are reducing dependence on special schools and increasing mainstream provision including bases⁶¹. The DfE are further requiring LAs to demonstrate how they are reducing special school dependence and increasing bases to secure their proportion of capital grants including signing a memorandum of understanding based on their SEND plan⁶². If the DfE are not confident in plans and performance against delivery there is also a suggestion that they could take SEND services away from the LA into a trust or withhold funding.

⁵⁸ Schools Week, 5th March 2026. Ruth Lucas. More than half of specialist free school projects set to go ahead <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/more-than-half-of-special-free-school-projects-set-to-go-ahead/>

⁵⁹ DfE School Capacity 2024-25. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-capacity/2024-25>

⁶⁰ SNJ. Matt Keer. January 9, 2026. LAs largely ignored Government’s “strong recommendation” on how to spend SEND Capital cash <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/exclusive-las-ignore-governments-recommend-spend-send-capital-cash/>

⁶¹ Schools Week, 13th March 2026. Samantha Booth. Revealed: DfE’s secret plan to cut special school expansion. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/revealed-dfes-secret-plan-to-cut-special-school-expansion/>

⁶² DfE. 25 March 2026. High needs provision capital allocations: guidance Updated <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-provision-capital-allocations/high-needs-provision-capital-allocations-guidance>

These measures are likely to alter the LAs decisions in respect of developing more special school capacity but expanding the alternative Specialist Base provision will take time during which pressure will only increase on a currently oversubscribed special school sector. Without the new statutory guidance on complex needs in place this may also complicate LAs decision making on suitable placements. These restrictions may also reduce options for parents locally, especially with the introduction of an agreed list from the LA of special school provision proposed in the reforms and the eventual reduction in special school places.

The strategy will also have to navigate the complex arrangements with LAs, MATs and schools locally in ensuring equitable distribution of specialist provision across a range of schools given the emphasis on local planning in the new proposals. Given the central role the DfE wants Inclusion Bases to play in bolstering the mainstream SEND offer there may need to be a more strategic approach to commissioning new provision locally. As the consolidation of SEN units and RPs illustrated earlier there is a danger of an increasing concentration of schools with SEND provisions leaving others without a similar offer. Schools with the “enhanced offer” will then be at risk of attracting even more SEND pupils, the SEND magnet school effect ⁶³. Commissioning of bases will have to take account of demographic factors, more consistent identification of SEND the existence of pre-existing provisions and measures to stop schools actively discouraging applications from pupils with SEND ⁶⁴. Otherwise, the danger is that inequitable provision will continue to exist between schools.

Funding staffing for Inclusion Bases

Specialist Bases will be commissioned by LAs, but if there is to be an expansion in provision there will also have to be additional specialist staff for the bases. This funding will presumably still have to come from the high needs budget which may present challenges given the intention to rebalance funding towards schools ⁶⁵. If the enhanced mainstream offer is a success and the number of placements in special schools reduces as the DfE hope this may free up more specialist teachers to move to mainstream provision. However, as the DfE acknowledges, it will take until 2035 to significantly alter the proportion of children in special schools but specialist provision in bases needs enhancing first which creates a problem for the strategy. There is also an

⁶³SEND Review: Right support Right place Right time. DfE 2022. TES 19th December 2025. <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/send-opening-resource-bases-puts-pressure-on-schools#:~:text=Back,SEND:%20Opening%20resource%20bases%20risks%20making%20you%20a%20magnet%20school,of%20these%20settings%20being%20created.>

⁶⁴ Charlotte O'Regan, Billy Huband-Thompson, Carl Cullinane. March 2026. Selective Inclusion The interplay of SEND and disadvantage in school admissions. Sutton Trust.

⁶⁵ DfE. SEND Consultation p86

expectation that the simplification of EHCPs ⁶⁶ and the eventual reduction in EHCPs will also free up EP time but this assumes that money will be available to redeploy EPs.

For Support Bases the consultation indicates that schools will provide funding, possibly using pooled funds across a number of schools possibly using elements of the new Mainstream Inclusion Fund ⁶⁷. Schools will therefore need to identify additional staffing resources or redeploy staff which appears to be part of DfE's expectations along with hoping those specialist teachers who have left the system may come back into schools.

Will restricting EHCPs to those with more complex needs alter current provision in SEN units?

Restricting access to EHCPs may also mean that some children who currently qualify for specialist bases may in future only be able to access support bases. For those who qualify for a specialist provision package and therefore an EHCP the intention is to move a proportion of current special school provision into specialist bases with the proportion of pupils increasing from 0.3 to 0.8 of the school population by 2035 ⁶⁸. How acceptable this will be to parents who value the specific specialisms and other elements of special school provision will depend on the quality and expertise of the Specialist Bases and how far the school they are located in and can demonstrate an inclusive ethos.

The need for clarity on criteria for placement in bases.

Currently there can be major issues for parents on the criteria, information available and process for access to a placement in SEN units and RPs which would need to be addressed.⁶⁹ Given that for Specialist Bases placement will be via an agreed package of provision and an EHCP there may still be issues around access to the level of support that parents think their children need. Under the new proposed arrangements these decisions may have to be challenged initially through the proposed "enhanced" school's complaints procedure which could lead to conflict being displaced from the LA to the school.

How will the new Inclusion Bases be held accountable?

DfE have committed to; *"work with Ofsted to ensure that settings operating high-quality Specialist and Support Bases, and specialist provision in mainstream settings, are recognised and celebrated"* ⁷⁰ It is not yet clear how far accountability will be delivered beyond the requirement for Ofsted to inspect such provisions and that the new

⁶⁶ DfE. SEND Consultation p60.

⁶⁷ DfE. 25th March 2026. Inclusive Mainstream Fund Methodology.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-mainstream-fund-2026-to-2027/inclusive-mainstream-fund-for-schools-methodology-2026-to-2027>

⁶⁸ DfE. 2026. Estimate from the Annex to the SEND Consultation.

⁶⁹ Contact. 2025. SEN Units and Resource Bases Briefing-England Only.

⁷⁰ DfE. SEND Consultation p98

guidance on Inclusion Bases will form a “benchmark” for Ofsted inspections ⁷¹. It will be important, especially given the emphasis on Inclusion Bases within the strategy, to ensure that there is an ongoing review and monitoring of the quality of provision and the outcomes for children in bases beyond formal inspections.

How to ensure Specialist Bases are inclusive

The Education Committee noted in its response that there are concerns about current SEN units and RPs “othering” children with SEND because the bases can be run as very separate provisions including being located on a separate part of the school estate. There have also been issues raised by parents that some provisions have been more about “holding” children rather than fully addressing their needs. The guidance on Inclusion Bases may help set expectations around inclusive practice, as will schools Inclusion Plans and Ofsted inspections. There will also need to be a sustained focus on the ethos of those provisions, building on the DfE commitment that practice is informed by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Equality Act 2010 legislation, to counter any dangers around separateness or lack of inclusion.

Summary

The enhanced role of Inclusion Bases is a key cornerstone of the overall strategy to improve inclusion with significant new resources identified to support the policy. SEN units and RPs provide an existing established approach to supporting children in mainstream that is well developed in many areas, both formally and informally, which the DfE hopes to build into a more cohesive and consistent national offer of support in mainstream schools. This strategy also has the advantage for DfE that it does not require any direct changes to legislation and therefore can be progressed quickly while laying the groundwork for other proposed legislative changes.

Currently SEN Units and RPs have no overall national quality criteria, agreed national models of operation and a limited body of evidence on which to evaluate their effectiveness. The DfE proposals go some way to address these gaps through the development of a national guidance for Inclusion Bases, research on their effectiveness and inspection through Ofsted against the Schools Inclusion Plan. Whether these will be adequate to address potential quality and operational issues is not clear without a more detailed account of what remedies there will be when issues with provisions are identified.

For Inclusion Bases to meet the DfE targets for expansion raises questions about the sufficiency of funding given the level of ambition, the current and future capacity of the system to secure the specialist staff needed and how far local planning and accountability systems will be able to ensure a more strategic, equitable and inclusive

⁷¹ DfE. SEND Consultation p55

approach to provision within the wider SEND reforms. There will also need to be more clarity on plans to ensure the culture change necessary to secure an inclusive school system that can underpin the changes proposed and secure parental confidence. From the limited evidence we have SEN units and RPs are popular with parents where they demonstrably provide additional specialist support and inclusive practice but are questioned when they are used to simply “hold” children in separate provision as a way of managing SEND children and young people.

If these considerable challenges can be addressed then the strategy could build on the work of successful SEN units and RPs to enhance the level of specialist support available in mainstream schools. Securing improved outcomes for children and young people and greater parental confidence in the mainstream SEND offer.

With thanks to Julie Wharton for early discussions on the scope of the paper and questions to be addressed.

Resourced provision in mainstream schools: a case study summary

Julie Wharton, Senior Lecturer, University of Winchester

Introduction

This presentation drew on Julie Wharton’s experience as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Winchester and former Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Inspector for Southampton City Council. It explored the evolution, challenges and opportunities of resourced provision in mainstream schools, situating the discussion within both historical inspection contexts and contemporary practice. The case study highlights the interplay between inclusion, specialist support and systemic pressures in shaping outcomes for learners with diverse needs.

Historical Context

As SEND Inspector (2007–2014), Wharton’s responsibilities included quality assurance of resourced provision, oversight of provision closures (e.g., dyslexia units), and transitions to new autism-focused provision. Inspection reports of Thornhill Primary School (2008, 2012) illustrate the socio-economic challenges of the setting, with high levels of deprivation, above-average proportions of pupils with learning difficulties, and the presence of specialist units such as *The Spinney*. These reports underscore the tension between mainstream inclusion and specialist provision, reflecting Glazzard’s

(2013) critique of the impact of resourced provision undermining both pupil outcomes and school effectiveness.

Contemporary Practice (2025)

The current model at Springwell School, operating a satellite class at Weston Park, exemplifies a hybrid approach. Pupils receive core subject teaching in a dedicated classroom led by Springwell staff, alongside integrated participation in mainstream foundation subjects, assemblies, and social activities. The use of shared uniforms and structured social opportunities reinforces belonging and inclusion. Lesson planning is carefully differentiated to meet individual needs, with allocations based on developmental rather than strictly age-related criteria.

Benefits of Resourced Provision

The presentation identifies several advantages:

- **Inclusive access** to mainstream education framed as both “inclusive service” and “safe space” (Strogilos & Ward, 2023).
- **Specialist support** embedded within mainstream settings, enabling tailored interventions (Bond & Hebron, 2016).
- **Flexible learning environments** allowing movement between mainstream and specialist contexts (Hebron & Bond, 2017).
- **Social opportunities** that extend beyond the classroom (Hebron & Bond, 2017).
- **Positive family perspectives**, valuing the balance of inclusion and expertise (Lindsay et al., 2016).

Challenges and Limitations

Conversely, risks include:

- **Hidden segregation**, where pupils spend disproportionate time in resourced provision (Webster, 2022).
- **Restricted access**, often limited to those with Education, Health and Care Plans (Keer, 2025).
- **Stigma and labelling**, with implications for self-esteem and peer relationships (Webster, 2022).
- **Funding variability**, reflecting systemic instability (Keer, 2025).

Purpose and Frameworks

Jordan (2025) articulates a seven-point “purpose” of resourced provision, ranging from fostering mutual benefit and tackling discrimination to enabling personalised curricula and extending friendship networks. Importantly, resourced provision also challenges

professional expertise, encouraging teachers to remain aspirational and curious. Complementary frameworks, such as Strogilos' (2025) toolkit, provide practical strategies for implementation, reinforcing the values-driven nature of provision.

Conclusion

Resourced provision is presented not as a structural fix but as a values-led commitment to equity, belonging, and professional growth. When purpose is clearly defined and practice inclusively enacted, such provision can transform mainstream schools into communities where every learner is recognised, supported and empowered. The case study demonstrates both the promise and the complexity of embedding specialist support within mainstream education, highlighting the need for sustained clarity of vision, adequate resourcing and ongoing professional reflection.

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Resourced Provision in Mainstream Schools to Promote the Inclusion of Students With SEND

Dr Vasilis Strogilos, Associate Professor, Centre for Research in Inclusion, University of Southampton

Summary

Dr Vasilis Strogilos presented findings from two closely connected projects funded by the British Academy and the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account. The first was a participatory study examining how resourced provision operates within mainstream schools. The second involved working collaboratively with three schools in Hampshire to co-develop a practical [toolkit](#) to support more inclusive approaches in schools with resourced provision (RP).

Although inclusion has been widely promoted as a core principle of education policy, ensuring meaningful participation for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools remains challenging in practice. While early debates often framed inclusion primarily as a rights-based issue (Florian, 2014), schools continue to face uncertainties about what effective inclusion looks like in everyday teaching and learning. One common approach has been the use of specialist facilities, such as resourced provision or specialist units, to provide targeted support within mainstream settings.

Existing research in this area remains limited. Most studies have focused either on describing resourced provision as a separate space within schools (Bond & Hebron, 2016), or on exploring the perspectives of parents, pupils, and staff, particularly in relation to autistic learners (Warren et al., 2020). Much less attention has been given to how these provisions connect with mainstream classrooms, or how responsibilities for planning and delivering education are shared across settings.

This project sought to work with schools to examine how RP can better support both educational progress and social inclusion for students with SEND. It focused on identifying effective practices, structural barriers, and everyday challenges faced by staff, students, and families. The research explored how resourced provision is understood and implemented in different contexts, and how stakeholders experience its benefits and limitations in supporting learning across both specialist and mainstream environments.

Method

Participants: The study involved participants from three mainstream schools with RP supporting students with a range of special educational needs and disabilities. Infant School A supported 14 pupils with speech, language, and communication needs as a

primary area of need, alongside additional complex difficulties. Participants from this setting included the RP manager, a mainstream class teacher, a teaching assistant (TA) working in the RP, a parent, and a pupil with autism and learning difficulties.

Junior School B provided resourced provision for 12 pupils with moderate learning difficulties. Participants from this school comprised the RP manager, a mainstream teacher, a TA working in the RP, a parent, and a pupil with moderate to severe learning difficulties.

Infant School C supported 23 pupils with severe and complex learning difficulties. Participants from this setting included the RP manager, an RP teacher, a mainstream teacher, two TAs working in the RP, a parent, and a pupil with complex learning difficulties.

Process and tools: The study adopted a multi-stage, qualitative research design that combined reflective interviews, focus groups, and observational methods. Data collection began with individual reflective conversations with RP managers and mothers to explore initial perspectives on provision, inclusion, and support practices. These data were analysed to inform the subsequent stages of the research.

Building on this initial analysis, three focus groups were conducted with RP teachers, mainstream teachers, and teaching assistants to examine professional experiences and collaborative practices. In parallel, structured school and classroom observations were undertaken with each participating child over two consecutive days, generating detailed contextual data on learning, participation, and support arrangements.

Data from the focus groups and observations were then systematically analysed to identify emerging themes and patterns. This analysis informed a further round of data collection, which included additional focus groups with the same professional participants and follow-up interviews with mothers. This iterative process enabled the research team to refine interpretations, validate findings, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of how RP operated across settings.

Findings

Schools were found to understand and use RP either as an inclusive service or a safe specialist space.

Inclusive Service Model: In the inclusive service model, students belonging to the RP are primarily educated in mainstream classrooms, with support from RP staff. They also participate in individual or small-group activities in the RP base for a limited number of hours each week. In this model, RP staff work closely with mainstream teachers, teaching assistants, and students with SEND within mainstream classes. Planning is undertaken collaboratively by mainstream and RP staff, and complementary learning targets are jointly agreed. Parents are encouraged to work in partnership with

mainstream teachers, rather than solely with RP staff, and external professionals also collaborate with mainstream staff to support inclusive practice.

Safe Specialist Space: In the safe specialist space model, the RP functions as a separate classroom within the school. Students are mainly educated within the RP and spend limited time in mainstream classes, typically for a few hours per day or week. Teaching in this model is predominantly delivered through small-group and individual instruction within the RP base. Students attend mainstream classes only when appropriate arrangements are in place to support their participation in specific activities, and not all RP students are assigned to a mainstream class. Educational targets are primarily set by RP staff, and collaboration with parents and external professionals is largely restricted to the RP team.

In addition to the above, eight areas for improvement were identified through reflective thematic analysis for strengthening RP's inclusive practice. These include

- i) developing a coherent whole-school approach to SEND. How specialist facilities can enhance the inclusion of students with SEND within the mainstream school;
- ii) improving co-planning and supporting effective transitions into mainstream classes;
- iii) enhancing the quality of education within mainstream classrooms;
- iv) strengthening provision within RP classes;
- v) Improving collaboration with parents;
- vi) Improving collaboration with external professionals;
- vii) Supporting the development of students' peer relationships, and
- viii) Strengthening partnerships with local authorities.

Together, these areas focus on improving coordination, consistency, and shared responsibility for supporting students with SEND.

Building on the eight identified areas/ themes, the research team worked closely with the three schools to co-create a [resourced provision toolkit](#). This process involved a large number of focus groups and individual reflective conversations with teachers, teaching assistants, and parents, with students' views also carefully considered. Through this collaborative approach, the toolkit was developed to reflect authentic practice and shared priorities.

The toolkit provides schools with a structured way to evaluate and strengthen their practice. It supports reflection on how to enhance the education and inclusion of students with SEND, improve collaboration with parents and external professionals,

and develop educators' understanding of mixed provision. By doing so, it promotes stronger partnership working between mainstream and RP staff, families, and specialist services.

Vasilis concluded this talk by offering recommendations for policy and practice in relation to the enhancement of specialist facilities as inclusive services. These included the following:

Recommendations for schools:

The recommendations emphasise the importance of positioning RP as an inclusive service, while retaining elements of a safe specialist space where needed.

Schools are encouraged to develop a continuum of provision that supports flexible movement between specialist and mainstream settings, and to prioritise movement towards a more inclusive service model. This shift increases opportunities for pupils' inclusion and helps to move away from the idea of specialist facilities operating as 'little special schools' within mainstream schools.

Clear communication with parents, including transparent information about the relationship between RP and mainstream provision, is essential.

Strengthening multi-agency collaboration through closer integration of health and social care professionals within schools can further enhance coordinated support.

Overall, the primary aim is to increase students' participation in mainstream classrooms/settings, supporting their access to, and engagement with, the mainstream curriculum.

Recommendation for the DfE and local authorities:

The DfE and Local Authorities need to strengthen RP as an inclusive, whole-school service. This includes integrating RP bases and SEND units into a unified inclusive model, and enrolling students with SEND primarily within mainstream schools to reinforce their sense of belonging.

There is a clear need to extend SEND training beyond specialist staff to include mainstream teachers, teaching assistants, and local authority personnel.

Inspection frameworks should recognise and evaluate the role of specialist facilities within mainstream settings, particularly its function as an inclusive service rather than solely a safe space.

Sustained communication and support between schools and local authorities is essential for effective accountability and improvement.

Central to these recommendations is the empowerment of RP staff to support the whole school, contributing to more inclusive mainstream education for all students with SEND.

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Plenary Discussion: Reflections on Clusters, Accountability and Future Policy Directions

The plenary session brought together insights from facilitators and participants across all discussion groups. It highlighted both the enthusiasm for emerging cluster models and the complexity of embedding inclusive practice within diverse local systems.

The three questions for discussion were:

1. **How are pupils with SEND currently supported and funded in mainstream settings, and how could this be improved?**

2. **What should accountability for SEND look like, and how can it better reflect inclusion and equity?**
3. **What is the role of resourced provision, and how should it develop within a more inclusive system?**

1. How are pupils with SEND currently supported and funded in mainstream settings, and how could this be improved?

Cluster models: promise, tensions and practical realities

Participants reflected positively on the clarity and transparency offered by cluster working, noting “a lot of positive response to the idea of clusters when it was explained”. The model was widely seen as strengthening shared responsibility, improving early identification, and enabling more equitable decision-making about support and funding.

However, groups also explored the practical tensions that arise when cluster arrangements intersect with existing structures such as multi-academy trusts (MATs). One contributor observed that school effectiveness clusters “wouldn’t necessarily map with an academy trust cluster or association”, prompting discussion about contextual factors that may work against locality-based principles.

Despite these challenges, participants emphasised that inclusive values had helped transcend organisational boundaries. As one speaker put it, “it isn’t about schools or academy trusts... it’s about the children”. Sustaining these principles over time was seen as essential, particularly given leadership turnover and the risk of messages “getting lost along the way”.

Sustaining engagement and maintaining the model over time

Groups discussed the long-term sustainability of cluster working. Drawing on examples from Nottingham, contributors noted that similar models had operated successfully for decades, but only with ongoing maintenance and cultural continuity. Threats included reductions in staffing, leadership changes and loss of historical understanding of inclusive practice.

Participants highlighted the need to involve new teachers, newly qualified staff and new cohorts of parents, recognising that expectations shift over time and that social media influences perceptions of SEND and inclusion.

Collaboration, MAT dynamics and incentives

Several groups examined the advantages and disadvantages of schools or MATs working together. Concerns were raised about the absence of penalties for withdrawal from

collaborative arrangements, and about competitive cultures in some areas. One participant recalled a headteacher stating, “I don’t have colleagues, I only have competitors”.

Others emphasised the untapped potential of headteachers’ willingness to contribute beyond their own settings, describing this as “a resource we haven’t fully tapped”.

Curriculum, teacher education and wider contextual pressures

Discussion also touched on curriculum flexibility, developmental appropriateness and the impact of COVID-19. Participants highlighted concerns that restrictive curricula can reduce play-based learning, despite evidence that increased play can accelerate progress for some learners.

Teacher education capacity was raised as a pressing issue. Universities reported growing difficulty securing placements, limiting opportunities for trainee teachers to develop confidence in meeting diverse needs.

COVID-related anxiety was discussed in nuanced terms. Some children had thrived in quieter, predictable home environments and struggled with returning to busy classrooms. As one participant noted, “the space is entirely inappropriate for some children”.

2. What should accountability for SEND look like, and how can it better reflect inclusion and equity?

Equality duties, policy alignment and whole-system coherence

A significant strand of discussion focused on the Equality Act and the anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments. Participants asked how cluster decision-making aligned with these statutory duties and whether cluster processes could help identify school policies “out of alignment” with disability requirements.

While clusters had not yet focused on policy auditing, some authorities had undertaken external reviews of resourced and alternative provision, including scrutiny of school policies. Participants emphasised the importance of trust-building, shared learning and supportive challenge rather than compliance-driven oversight.

Accountability: scope, purpose and cultural change

Many groups felt strongly that “there’s enough accountability in the system already that isn’t being met”. Participants were cautious about adding new layers of accountability without addressing existing gaps.

A recurring theme was the need to foreground disability within SEND policy. Several contributors argued that the “D bit [of SEND] should be there” in accountability frameworks, noting that disability duties are statutory but “just not enforced”. Groups

discussed stigma, misunderstandings of disability and the limited engagement of mainstream schools with the Equality Act.

Participants also explored whether accountability should focus more on individual-level duties (e.g., reasonable adjustments) or school-level processes. Some suggested revisiting tools such as the *Index for Inclusion*, which had previously supported self-evaluation and cultural development.

Reflective practice, peer support and sector-led improvement

Several groups emphasised the value of reflective practice and peer-to-peer learning within cluster models. Participants noted that sector-led tools such as SEND Reviews could complement cluster-based collaboration, strengthening relationships and enabling schools to support one another with data, development plans and shared problem-solving.

There was little support for statutory SEND Support status. Instead, participants advocated for stronger implementation of existing duties (particularly best endeavours and the Equality Act) rather than creating new frameworks.

Voice, participation and accountability to children and families

Finally, participants stressed the importance of embedding children's and parents' voices within accountability systems. Concerns were raised that clusters could be perceived as a "professional closed shop" if families were not meaningfully involved in decision-making.

Contributors argued that accountability must include evaluation of the quality of pathways from the perspective of young people themselves, particularly where resourced provision operates as a separate space within schools.

3. What is the role of resourced provision, and how should it develop within a more inclusive system?

Relationship between clusters and resourced provision

Groups explored the relationship between clusters and resourced provision. Some participants questioned whether the expansion of resource bases risked implying that "some schools can do it and other schools can't". Others argued that clusters could strengthen links with specialist provision, provided collaboration remained values-led rather than structural.

Participants also discussed how far the cluster model could extend, including whether resource bases should become more geographically organised and whether this might lead to more generic provision. The discussion highlighted the need for clarity about the purpose, design and governance of resourced provision within a wider inclusive system.

Integration, coherence and future development

Participants reflected on the importance of ensuring that resourced provision does not operate in isolation from mainstream practice. They emphasised the need for coherent pathways, shared professional learning and strong relationships between specialist and mainstream staff.

Groups also raised questions about the voices involved in shaping resourced provision (particularly the balance between bottom-up co-production and top-down decision-making). Participants stressed that future development should be grounded in inclusive principles, local need and meaningful engagement with families.

Conclusion

The seminar underscored the urgency of strengthening SEND policy and practice through early intervention, coherent accountability and well-designed resourced provision. Across all contributions, there was a clear commitment to collaboration, equity and shared responsibility as foundations for a more inclusive system. The discussions point towards practical, evidence-informed approaches that can support schools, local areas and national policymakers in shaping the next phase of SEND reform.