



Meeting summaries outline topics discussed by the Minister for Social Security and Disability and the Disability Unit Regional Stakeholder Network Chairs. These summaries do not reflect UK government policy unless specifically stated.

Meeting summary and action points – 25 February 2026

Quarterly meetings between the Minister for Social Security and Disability, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP and Regional Stakeholder Network (RSN) Chairs

Attendees: Minister Timms, Minister for School Standards – Georgia Gould OBE MP, RSN Chairs – Louise Mckiernan MBE (West Midlands), Ali Gunn (North West), Ailith Harley-Roberts (Yorkshire and the Humber Deputy for Karen Hoe OBE), Marc Goblot (Greater London), Sam Everard MBE (South West), Chloe Plummer (South East), Anne Wafula Strike MBE (East of England), Elspeth McPherson (North East), Justin Donne (East Midlands), David Bateman – Head of Stakeholder Engagement, Disability Unit (DU) Cabinet Office and other officials from DU and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Official from the Department for Education (DfE).

Discussion point	Action point
<p>Updates from Minister for Social Security and Disability, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP (Minister Timms)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister Timms welcomed the RSN Chairs and said that it was good to see those Chairs and members who could make the stakeholder event in December to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. He congratulated Sam Everard, South West RSN Chair, on her recent MBE for services to people with disabilities. He thanked the Chairs for their insight on the transport theme provided in the last meeting (11 November) and in the detailed written feedback afterwards. This was very useful and was also sent to the Department for Transport (DfT). <p>Minister Timms provided the RSN Chairs with updates on some key work happening currently:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work continues on the Plan for Disability, however it will be a bit longer until we get to the stage where we can talk to people about the work. • The independent Disability Advisory Panel, chaired by Zara Todd, has appointed 10 members and held its first meeting in January. The Panel will work on employment support and other health and disability policy, apart from the Timms Review. • The Timms Review of PIP has now set up the steering group of 12 people (details of which have been published), plus three co-chairs including Minister Timms. The group met in January and has more meetings soon, where they will work to set out how they propose to get other stakeholders involved in their work soon. The Review will report to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions by autumn 2026. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. RSN Chairs to send to DU SEND detailed written feedback 2. DU / Minister's Office to arrange the next meeting.

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sir Charlie Mayfield’s Keep Britain Working Review Vanguard Taskforce work continues at pace. Around 120 Vanguard employers have now signed up so far, who will try out new ideas to see what works best in practice, to identify what approaches could be taken forward. • Work to reform the Disability Confident scheme has been announced. The scheme has huge potential, but it needs to be more robust. One of the key changes will be reducing the membership term at Level 1 from three years to two, to ensure that employers make meaningful progress through the levels or leave the scheme. There are also likely to be other changes that need to be made. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sam (South West) commented that sole traders have expressed concerns that they will lose their Level 1 status as they aren’t large enough to hire employees, but want to show their commitment to supporting disabled people. Minister Timms said that there are no immediate changes for existing members and they will be contacted when anything is changing, but that he will keep this point in mind when looking at this. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<p>THEMATIC DISCUSSION: Feedback from RSN regions on SEND</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> RSN Chairs' meetings with Minister Timms are based upon specific themes. The theme for this meeting was agreed in advance as special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Minister Timms welcomed Minister for School Standards, Georgia Gould OBE MP (Minister Gould) and the Department for Education (DfE) to this meeting. <p>Minister Gould gave the RSN Chairs an update on plans to transform the SEND system, following the recent publication of the Schools White Paper and consultation launch on these proposed reforms, which followed regional engagement with education professionals and families, called the National Conversation. She would like as many people as possible to respond to the consultation, which is open until 18 May, to ensure that people's voices are at the heart of these reforms. Further details can be found here.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specialist places and infrastructure design: £3.7 billion capital investment to 2030 to create over 60,000 more specialist places. New guidance on inclusive design for schools has been published covering disability access, acoustics, and lighting. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff training and specialist support: £200 million over next 3 years will be invested in training for all education staff, and a new requirement for all education staff to be trained on SEND and inclusion. Dedicated funding from an Inclusive Mainstream Fund will see £1.6 billion over 3 years go directly to education settings to support children with SEND. An “Experts at Hand” service will see £1.8 billion over 3 years of support provided to education settings for things like occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and educational psychologists. • National standards: New national standards proposed that will set out what provision and practices should look like in all schools, to ensure consistency across different regions to end the “postcode lottery”. • Support layers and legal duty: The consultation proposes a new offer for children who need additional support – Targeted and Targeted Plus layers – which can be accessed from mainstream education settings without waiting for assessments or a diagnosis, and without needing an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The support will be set out in law through National Inclusion Standards, with a duty on schools and funding to provide it. Children receiving targeted or specialist support will get an Individual Support Plan (ISP), developed with their families. For children and young people with more complex needs new Specialist Provision Packages will be developed. Subject to the consultation and legislation we propose to transition gradually to the new system early in the next decade. We have proposed a new role for the Children’s Commissioner to oversee system readiness and monitor progress as we transition to the new system. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For disputes about EHCPs, parents/young people must first consider using mediation to attempt to resolve their disagreements. We want to encourage families to work with local authorities (LAs) to resolve disputes as early as possible, without the need for a Tribunal appeal. The SEND Tribunal will remain an important legal backstop where earlier resolution is not possible, parents/young people will be able to appeal to the SEND Tribunal about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An LA’s refusal to assess whether a child or young person needs an EHCP. – Whether a child or young person needs a Specialist Provision Package and therefore needs an EHCP. – Which Specialist Provision Package the child or young person should have. – The LA’s decision about which school or setting should be named in the EHCP – although we propose to amend the Tribunal’s existing powers. The Tribunal will consider the LA’s decision and will have the power either to uphold it or require it to retake the decision. The LA will, however, make the final decision. – A decision to cease an EHCP. • Families will also continue to be able to appeal to the Tribunal if they feel that a school has discriminated against on grounds of their disability – e.g. the school has failed to make reasonable adjustments. Families should first attempt to resolve the dispute locally, using school complaints processes first. There is no requirement to consider mediation. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<p>Minister Timms asked the Chairs to share a short summary of regional feedback on the SEND theme with himself and Minister Gould. Along with DfE, DU officials also attended to hear and capture this feedback. RSN Chairs will send detailed feedback to DU after this meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN South West – A significant backlog on panels, with some children missing school start dates. Frustrations around case officers delays (unavailable, waiting for calls, long delays when a case officer is replaced) and inconsistency with processes. Targets in EHCPs are inconsistent and use unclear language, which causes challenges for schools and parents (especially when moving areas). EHCPs are often not updated for years. Case officers often rely on reports from independent services like speech and language, who don't understand the child's needs. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minister Gould commented that the new system will introduce standardised up-to-date national digital documents to help consistency. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>RSN North East – Welcomed the White Paper and ISPs, which should address many concerns. Lack of specialists in schools – need for more Speech and Language Therapists (SALTs) working directly with teachers. Issues with EHCP processes. Long delays in NHS continuing care services (children can still be waiting when they turn 18 and are placed at the bottom of adult waiting lists). Early intervention is imperative and must include parent support – Sure Start centres were good. Need to ensure the DWP schools service engages with specialist schools, with a pathway into work. Concerns for some children with autism and learning disabilities handling the secondary school environment – this transition point often causes problems, especially behavioural. Class size and school design needs to be considered. Better behavioural management support for parents is needed.</p> <p>RSN West Midlands – Delays for Autism and ADHD assessments, with an unfairness where families who can afford private assessments move faster. Families often feel caught between education, health, and social care services disputes – better coordination is needed with guidance on responsibilities. Insufficient support in mainstream settings. Capacity/provision gaps within LAs, which are perceived to be due to workforce shortages and lack of provision. Stress placed on families who are trying to navigate and battle the system. Supportive of the White Paper bringing national standards to reduce the “postcode lottery”. Clearer EHCP process needed with accessible guidance for families. Investment needed in early intervention and support.</p> 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN South East – Lack of funding, staff and infrastructure means children are falling out of unsuitable places. Concerns around both specialist provision and support in mainstream schools – issues with specialist provisions struggling to retain and recruit staff. Delays to EHCPs especially for children with life-limiting or degenerative conditions who are impacted most. Issues with transitions from education into employment – it is great that EHCPs go to age 25 but then there is a cliff edge – transitions need to be looked at while they are still in education. Many children waiting for formal diagnosis, especially if neurodivergent, aren't getting support so aren't in school. The inclusive nature of the White Paper is good, especially around the school environment, which is important. However, a one size fits all approach doesn't work, with children with a variety of disabilities. – Minister Gould confirmed that the Government is consulting on introducing a new fast-track process at birth for children with life-limiting or long-term conditions, and reiterated that the new targeted support approach means a diagnosis is not required for a school to begin providing help. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN North West – Families who have been through the system 20 years ago and recently feel that there has been no change felt – reform needs to look at how it practically impacts so that it is felt on the ground. Concern about the transition from specialist provision in higher education into work – employer attitudes remain a barrier and disabled people are often left with unstretching roles. Transition planning into adult social care needs to happen earlier on. Highlighted a good practice example of how one NHS neurodivergence disability pass can be used across hospitals and social care settings, reducing the need for families to repeatedly tell their stories. Parents often feel burnt out battling for reasonable adjustments and challenging decisions – outcomes depend on parent knowledge and time so there is an inequity. School transport in some rural areas limits college attendance. Newly arrived families to the UK often have language barriers misinterpreted as safeguarding and SEND issues – cultural differences aren't understood. Positive example of a peer to peer programme where autistic older people deliver sessions to young people to help reduce stigma. – Minister Gould commented that she would very much welcome to see these good practice case studies. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN Yorkshire and the Humber – The scale of the SEND system which is under incredible strain is often described as being “in crisis” by parents and schools. Councils are carrying significant deficits – commitments to support won’t touch the scale of the pressures. Delays in EHCP deadlines in LAs (and poor communication) can result in some waiting for months and years, and also leading to tribunals – pushing families into crisis or being forced into homeschooling. Not enough specialist places so mainstream schools are struggling to meet needs due to capacity issues – some parents have to look out of the area. Non-visible disabilities are often overlooked. Inclusion plans can work well for some, but they don’t work for everyone and should be a choice with families. School transport is often not being provided after age 16. Early intervention is essential. Concerns about whether the new ISPs will be as legally enforceable as an EHCP – parent anxiety about the potential erosion of legal rights that help currently. • RSN East Midlands – Ahead of the White Paper publication there’s been widespread fear amongst parents that children’s legal protections are under threat and a worry that there’s often a disconnect between lived experience and proposals. A long term shift in how inclusion is looked at in school policies is needed – rethink of attendance policies that create tension for families are needed – home education options for some families should be better supported – a ban on the use of isolation rooms is needed – the national curriculum needs more flexibility to include practical activities rather than a purely academic focus – teacher training is vital. The system isn’t preparing children for adulthood. The Children and Families Act 2014 was well-intended but with some unintended consequences – strains on the system and some outdated practices in a rigid system are harming some children. Focus is needed on long term change with the need for creative ideas. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN East of England – After child diagnosis parents should be given better support as it can be daunting, such as counselling and perhaps regional forums of parents and children with similar situations. School transport is a priority as public transport will often mean children not attending on time. Statistics show that only 4% of pupils with an EHCP sustain a quality destination after school, with national averages without an EHCP being around 90%. Rather than waiting for a 10 year plan, small wins are needed every few years. Newly arrived families to the UK should request support with language lessons as these are available. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minister Gould stated that the government is consulting on a new role for the Children’s Commissioner to provide oversight and scrutiny of SEND reform implementation. • RSN Greater London – The reality is that there is a massive shortage of SALTs/ SEND professionals – funding alone will not solve the issue if the experts do not exist and it will take time to get people qualifications – parents are often being forced to go private if they can (and if services will come to their area). Many parents feel they are lied to by LAs and rely far more on other parents for information – but some don’t have access to speak to other parents and so are easy targets for bad practice – little has changed in 20 years. The EHCP process and “postcode lottery” remains the biggest problem and is distorted by funding issues and long waiting lists – lots of schools are having to spend their own budgets to cover support for children while they wait for assessments. There are positive examples of ATech support in a few areas, with high levels of interest as to what it could bring, but in general there isn’t much around. Lack of skills means SEND support offered is generic for children, regardless as to whether they actually work for each child. 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>Minister Gould closed by commenting that many of the topics raised have also been heard through the National Conversation events and that her opening updates show some of the things the government are doing to respond. She then addressed a few other themes raised by the RSN. For early years intervention, £200m will be invested in Best Start hubs over 3 years with each having a lead SEND practitioner to support families. Regarding the lack of professionals, £40m will be allocated for training, including new speech and language apprenticeships, plus £200m for SEND teacher training over 3 years. New guidance and support on reasonable adjustments will be developed, with new models explored, such as the potential to train parents who have been through the system to support others. There will be more work on the quality of inclusion provision in mainstream schools, whilst also recognising that it isn't the best place for every child. The work on the school environment design standards is also key. There is work to be done to bring together children's services with healthcare and adult social care, and for the DWP school service to work with specialist education on pathways into employment. There is also a real need for curriculum adaptation. Finally, there will be a legal duty to deliver ISPs, working with parents, along with a school complaints process and the tribunal system as a back-up. She thanked the RSN for such a rich and insightful set of observations, noting that she is interested to see the more detailed feedback, and good examples as it is important to learn from the best out there. She encouraged the RSN to continue this dialogue, engaging via the consultation which is open until 18 May.</p> 	

Discussion point	Action point
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minister Timms closed by thanking the RSN Chairs and their regional members for their extremely useful contributions, and reminded Chairs that their further detailed written feedback will be welcomed. His next meeting with the Chairs will be in May 2026.	