



Department
for Education

Inclusive workforce models

Research report

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Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
ASA	Academic support assistant
ASD	Autism spectrum disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CPD	Continuing professional development
EAL	English as an additional language
EBSA	Emotionally based school avoidance
ECF	Early career framework
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EHC plan	Education, health and care plan
ELSA	Emotional literacy support assistant
EP	Educational psychologist
EYFS	Early years foundation stage
FSM	Free school meals
GIAS	Get Information About Schools (administrative data)
HLTA	Higher level teaching assistant
IEP	Individual education plan
ITT	Initial teacher training
KS	Key stage
LA	Local authority
LSC	Learning Support Centre
LSA	Learning support assistant
MAT	Multi-academy trust
MHST	Mental health support team

NELI	Nuffield Early Language Intervention
NPQ	National Professional Qualification
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OT	Occupational therapist
PDC	Personal development coach
PINS	Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools
PPA	Planning, preparation and assessment
PRU	Pupil referral unit
QFT	Quality First Teaching
QFT	Qualified teacher status
RE	Religious education
RP	Resource provision
SaLT	Speech and language therapy/therapist
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health
SEN	Special educational needs
SENCO	Special educational needs co-ordinator
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SLCN	Speech, language and communication needs
SLT	Senior leadership team
SNAP	Special needs assessment profiles
SWC	School Workforce Census (administrative data)
TA	Teaching assistant
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
USS	Universal SEND Services

Glossary

Assess–plan–do–review cycle: a 4-stage, iterative process used to identify, support, and review pupil progress and the suitability of SEND support, recommended in the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF) guidance on SEND in mainstream schools.¹

ASDAN: an education charity and awarding organisation offering courses, accredited curriculum programmes and UK-regulated qualifications to learners working from pre-entry to level 3.

Attachment aware practice: approaches that help staff understand how disrupted or insecure attachment can influence behaviour, relationships and learning. Training typically includes sensitivity to emotional cues, relational repair and consistency of adult responses.

Attainment 8: a measure of pupil attainment across 8 qualifications including maths (double weighted) and English (double weighted, if both English language and English literature are sat), 3 other qualifications that count in the EBacc measures and 3 further qualifications that can be GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or technical awards from the DfE approved list.

Boxall profile: a standardised assessment and support tool for social, emotional and mental health needs in school-age children.

Cognition and learning set: a small, specialist pathway for pupils with significant learning difficulties with limited mainstream provision (e.g. PE and technology).

Colourful semantics: a speech and language therapy approach that uses a colour-coded system to teach children sentence structure and improve their verbal and written language communication needs.

Communication focused training: general training for staff on adapting classroom language, simplifying instructions, using visual supports and modelling vocabulary to support pupils with a wide range of communication needs.

Direct Instruction: a teaching method developed by Siegfried Engelmann to turn all students into confident learners through explicit instruction.

Dyslexia Gold: Online reading intervention for ages 6 to 12.

Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA): where anxiety or emotional distress affects a pupil's ability to attend school.

¹ EEF (2020) [Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools. Guidance report.](#)

Elklan: accredited training for staff to support pupils with speech, language and communication needs.

ELSA: the emotional literacy support assistant intervention was designed to build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of their pupils from within their own resources. This is achieved by training teaching assistants to develop and deliver individualised support programmes to meet the emotional needs of children and teenagers in their care.

FUNMOVES: School-based fundamental movement skill screening.

GOV.UK Notify: the UK government's official digital messaging service. It allows public sector organisations to send mass communications such as surveys, reminders, alerts, appointment messages and other official notifications.

Literacy Intervention Toolkit: a programme of mindful and metacognitive teaching that targets the lowest achieving 20% of pupils in Year 7. It aims to accelerate their progress in English and across the wider curriculum, enabling them to reach age-related expectations by the end of the academic year.

NELI: the Nuffield Early Language Intervention is a 20-week programme designed to build children's vocabulary, listening and storytelling skills in the early years.

New Group Reading Test (NGRT): a digitally adaptive assessment that adjusts as each student responds, giving reliable insights into both group and individual reading skills.

Number Stacks: a unique combination of stackable place-value counters and video tutorials to enable any adult, regardless of teaching experience, to help children master the foundations of the number system.

Pre- and post-teaching: work with pupils before a lesson to help them understand key ideas in advance and at the end to clarify and reinforce learning.

Precision teaching: an instructional approach that uses direct and frequent measurement of a child's performance in a specific skill to chart and visualise progress and inform the teacher's instructional decisions. This provides highly specific learning targets which are then effectively memorised using a quick and engaging rote repetition approach.

Progress 8: a way of measuring the progress that pupils make from the end of key stage 2 (the last year of primary school) to the end of key stage 4 (when they take GCSEs).

Rapid Reading: an intervention for struggling readers working behind age related expectations, and children with special educational needs.

Read Write Inc: a programme designed to support the teaching of reading and writing in schools.

TEACCH style: a teaching approach for children with autism spectrum disorder, developed in the US in the 1960s.

Teach meets: a teacher-led professional development event where educators come together to share ideas, swap practical teaching strategies, discuss challenges and collaborate on solutions.

Team Teach: training to support the development of positive behaviour cultures in education, child and adult services.

Trauma informed approaches: whole school practices informed by an understanding of how trauma affects emotional regulation, behaviour and learning. Approaches typically include strategies to reduce triggers, strengthen relationships and create predictable, safe routines.

Scaffolding: temporary support to enable pupils to successfully complete tasks that they cannot yet do independently that is removed when it is no longer required.

SNAP assessments: special needs assessment profiles for identifying a child's strengths and additional needs across learning, behaviour, and social and emotional development, including SNAP-SpLD for specific learning difficulties and SNAP-B for behaviour.

Soft starts: an approach to providing a gentle start to the school day where pupils have breakfast together or play games or sit and chat with their peers and adults, with the aim of allowing emotional regulation before the greater pressure of the learning day begins.

Zones of regulation: a framework to support the development of emotional regulation and behavioural skills, based on 4 coloured 'zones'. It helps children recognise emotional states and develop coping strategies.

Headline findings

The report is based on insight from interviews with 142 leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) from 80 mainstream primary and 62 secondary schools, interviews with 12 SEND sector experts and in-depth case study research with a range of staff across 12 schools focusing on 4 workforce models and 4 cross-cutting themes around staff deployment. Fieldwork was conducted in 2 phases between May and December 2025.

Schools that took part in the research overwhelmingly shared the government's drive for inclusion in mainstream settings. In practice, what inclusion looked like – and how it was achieved – varied across settings, and schools organised and deployed staff in different ways to respond to an increasingly diverse and fluctuating range of needs.

The research identified 4 overarching models of support for pupils with SEND, driven by schools' ideas on effective inclusion, volume and type of pupil needs, access to space, ability to recruit and retain experienced and trained staff and budget constraints.

All schools used adapted teaching and environments to support pupils within mainstream classes. Where the volume and complexity of need was relatively low, schools said they often used this approach in combination with a small number of additional interventions delivered around teaching time. Some schools set up support bases to provide support and interventions to pupils from their own intake when needs cannot be fully met within mainstream classes and through brief interventions. Some schools set up specialist bases, commissioned by the Local Authority (LA), usually for pupils with specific types of needs from across the area. The research also identified schools delivering tiered support through a combination of these models.

The findings indicate that a school's approach to SEND support was a key factor determining their workforce model and staff deployment. While specialist bases were led and staffed by dedicated teams, other models of provision drew on the core school workforce. Schools with specialist and school-led support bases typically had access to staff with more experience and specialisms in different types of support. Across all models:

- Teachers were central to inclusion. In addition to adapting teaching within mainstream, they retained responsibility for devising and tracking input and outcomes for pupils with SEND, even when learning took place outside the classroom.
- Teaching assistants (TA) and higher level teaching assistants (HLTA) were primarily used to deliver support for pupils with SEND. Staff were deployed in a range of ways across, within and outside of mainstream. When necessary, support was provided on an individual basis; however, schools were moving away from the

'Velcro' model whereby the same TA provides 1:1 support to a specific pupil each day. Increasingly, wider support staff (such as pastoral teams) were working with TAs/HLTAs and fulfilling a significant role in the support of pupils with SEND.

- Flexibility was key to meeting the diverse needs of pupils with SEND. The research found that staff deployment was being adapted on a termly, weekly and even daily basis to ensure all pupils are accessing learning.
- Among the schools interviewed, SENCOs were generally members of the senior leadership team. In addition to providing strategic oversight of SEND support, SENCOs' responsibilities were wide ranging. In larger schools, particularly those with specialist bases, the SENCO was increasingly supported by a deputy or assistant SENCO and administrative staff.
- Schools interviewed reported that access to and input from external professionals such as educational psychologists and LA teams was limited. Due to this, TAs and HLTAs were being upskilled to undertake assessments and deliver interventions and support, with training and oversight from external specialists.
- Schools interviewed invested in wider training and development in SEND for their staff, including via national programmes and professional qualifications. Schools said they would welcome a greater focus on SEND in initial teacher training as well as access to high quality CPD and evidence on effective practice. To support effective inclusion in mainstream settings, leaders recognised that staff needed to understand types of SEND and how to support pupils with diverse needs, including how to adapt teaching and learning appropriately and the additional strategies and interventions needed to deliver positive outcomes for pupils.
- Senior leaders were pivotal to the development of inclusive cultures, fostering the mindset that SEND support is everyone's responsibility. When inclusion worked well, it was because the whole workforce was engaged and confident in supporting pupils with SEND. Leaders, teachers, TAs/HLTAs, inclusion managers and pastoral teams were all involved in sharing information and understanding pupils' needs.

Executive summary

This report presents the findings from a major qualitative research project commissioned by DfE. The aim was to build a robust evidence base on how mainstream schools deploy their workforce to support pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) within different models of provision. The research identifies what drives decision-making about the approach to meeting pupil need and the associated deployment of staff, and the factors that help or hinder schools to deliver a more inclusive offer.

The research was conducted between May and December 2025 while the government was developing the Schools White Paper² and proposals for a reformed SEND system. The findings offer a valuable insight into current practice to inform the development and implementation of the new SEND and inclusion arrangements.

Approach

The research set out to answer 4 overarching questions:

1. How is inclusivity for pupils with SEND defined and promoted?
2. What workforce models do mainstream schools use to support pupils with SEND?
3. What are the drivers and influences shaping the development of approaches to deploying staff to support pupils with SEND in mainstream settings?
4. What would be needed to enable mainstream schools to more effectively support a greater number of pupils with SEND?

The research was conducted in 2 phases between May and December 2025. The first phase was designed to map the diversity of approaches to SEND provision across mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. A total of 142 leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) from 80 mainstream primary and 62 secondary schools were interviewed, along with 12 SEND sector experts.³ The second phase examined practice in greater depth to inform case studies focusing on 4 workforce models and 4 cross-cutting themes around staff deployment. A total of 34 school staff, including teachers, teaching assistants (TAs) and wider support staff were interviewed, drawn from a sub-sample of schools identified in phase 1.

² DfE (2026) [Every child achieving and thriving](#).

³ Sector experts were identified in collaboration with DfE and included regional directors, members of the neurodivergence task group, inclusion panel members, leaders in inclusion practice and academics working in the field of SEND and inclusion.

Key findings

Defining and promoting inclusion

Schools overwhelmingly shared the government's view that, wherever possible, pupils with SEND should be educated within their local community. Inclusion was rooted in principles of equity, belonging and a belief that all children benefit socially, emotionally and academically from learning alongside their peers.

In practice, what inclusion looked like – and how it was achieved – varied across settings, and schools organised and deployed staff in different ways to respond to an increasingly diverse and fluctuating range of needs.

In interviews, school staff and experts reported that pupils with the most complex needs are most effectively supported in specialist provision.

Models of inclusive workforce practice

The research identified 4 overarching models that exemplify how schools support pupils with SEND and around which staffing is framed.

Model 1: Mainstream only

In this model, pupils with SEND were taught and supported alongside their peers in mainstream lessons. Teachers were responsible for planning and delivering lessons that were adapted to meet the needs of their pupils with SEND.

Support staff, such as TAs, higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) and learning support assistants (LSAs) were used flexibly to further adapt teaching and scaffold⁴ learning in lessons. They also delivered short, focused interventions and pre- and post-teaching.⁵ This helped to address gaps and ensure cognition. One-to-one support was focussed on pupils with significant or complex needs specified in education, health and care (EHC) plans.

Leaders and SENCOs perceived that this approach is effective for maintaining access to high quality teaching for pupils with low to moderate SEND. The suitability of this approach for pupils presenting with higher and more complex needs was questioned, however.

⁴ Temporary support to enable pupils to successfully complete tasks that they cannot yet do independently.

⁵ Work with pupils before a lesson to help them understand key ideas in advance and at the end to clarify and reinforce learning.

Model 2: Support base: School-led support

When 'mainstream only' was considered insufficient to meet the needs of certain pupils with SEND, schools often set up additional provision. This kind of support was not commissioned or additionally funded by the LA but led by the school itself.

Support bases typically supported 2 broad groups of pupils whose needs cannot be met through classroom adaptations alone: pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs who require a quieter, more predictable space to regulate while still accessing structured academic teaching, and pupils with cognition and learning needs who are working significantly below age-related expectations and require more targeted, small-group or individual academic input.

Some support bases operated flexibly for short interventions and regulation, while others resembled LA-funded specialist bases and offered small-group provision with consistent staffing, specialist-led sessions and highly adapted timetables.

Staff deployment was determined by the scale and structure of the support base. Most schools allocated staff from the existing workforce to deliver provision within the support base, but some appointed teachers and TAs with relevant specialisms.

Trained support staff across both phases delivered academic support or interventions to small groups in timetabled spaces with support and oversight from the SENCO or inclusion lead to help pupils develop the skills to manage their emotions, regulate behaviour and re-engage with learning. The support base offered a quieter, more predictable environment for pupils who cannot manage in the wider mainstream setting for the whole school day.

For learning support, qualified teachers typically planned an adapted curriculum and retained responsibility for assessment and goal setting. The adapted curriculum was predominantly delivered by support staff such as TAs, HLTAs and LSAs.

Some school-led support bases provided intensive support for pupils with high-level needs and those at risk of exclusion and had a similar structure and function to LA-funded specialist bases. A high adult presence was needed for safety, regulation, consistency of routines and personalised teaching which often focused on life skills and vocational training. Staff often moved between the support base and mainstream classes to maintain continuity of support for these groups of pupils.

Model 3: Specialist base: LA-funded SEN units and resource provision

Specialist bases, which are commissioned, funded and overseen by the LA represent a more structured and specialised approach to supporting pupils with SEND within mainstream schools. Learning and support were delivered within distinct, identifiable

spaces separate from mainstream classrooms. Some specialist bases were located in purpose-built or adapted buildings on the school site.

DfE currently defines 2 types of specialist base: SEN units that are attended by pupils for most or all of the school day and resource provision (RP) that is attended by pupils who spend more than half their time in mainstream classes.⁶ In practice, the proportion of time individual pupils attended specialist bases could fluctuate and within cohorts attending the same provision there may be some pupils who attended for most the day and others who attended for only short periods of time.

Pupils allocated a placement within a specialist base typically had higher or more complex needs and their support requirements were detailed in an EHC plan.

Specialist bases were typically overseen by a lead teacher with expertise aligned to the focus or designation of the provision. The staff deployed and staffing ratios were shaped by the volume of pupils and level and type of need.

Pupils accessed an adapted version of the national curriculum developed and delivered by qualified teachers. Teachers were supported by TAs who were also trained in therapeutic or curriculum approaches and external professionals who provided specialist input, including speech and language therapists (SaLT), occupational therapists (OT) and educational psychologists (EP).

Model 4. Tiered support

A 'tiered approach' combines school-led and LA-funded provision, underpinned by a mainstream only approach. The characteristics of the individual components of tiered support mirrored the models described above.

This approach enabled space, resources and expertise within specialist bases to be utilised to support pupils with SEND that do not have an LA-commissioned place within the provision.

The expertise within specialist bases was also often used to support the training and development of the wider school workforce.

Staff deployment was highly dynamic, with adults rotating between mainstream, school-led and LA-funded provision.

Inclusive practice and workforce deployment

Across all 4 workforce models, schools described a consistent set of features that underpin effective and inclusive provision. When schools felt inclusion was working well,

⁶ This terminology is used throughout the report, however, it is acknowledged that DfE is proposing to change it in the future.

it was because the whole workforce was engaged and confident in supporting pupils with SEND. Leaders, teachers, TAs/LSAs/HLTAs, inclusion managers, and pastoral and/or social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) teams were all involved in sharing information and understood pupils' needs. Where practice was considered by schools interviewed to be most effective, teachers remained central; they planned and assessed learning for all pupils, including those who spend part of their week outside mainstream classrooms. Support staff used structured approaches and check-ins to support pupils while also developing pupils' independence.

Interviewees also reflected that effective inclusion relies on calm, predictable environments and staff skilled in approaches that enable pupils to remain regulated and included in learning. To achieve this, schools interviewed created simple, well-organised classrooms and established quiet workspaces, regulation rooms and small group areas. Schools with specialist bases were more likely to employ specialist teaching and support staff, from whom mainstream staff could learn and observe effective practices. Pupil learning gaps were constantly monitored and timetables were adapted using tools schools purchased. Inclusion, SEND and pastoral teams worked together to plan support across the year, term, week and day which was responsive to pupil need. Interviewees reported that training and development were key and most effective when based on real life scenarios that reflect schools' experiences. Good practice and inclusion were also supported by partnership working across multi-academy trusts (MATs), other local schools, external specialists, LAs and NHS trusts. Where specialist teams visited regularly, their input strengthened staff skills and the quality of the provision across the school.

Benefits of inclusion

Schools that have developed strong inclusive systems reported clear and wide-ranging benefits for pupils. In their view, pupils with SEND experience calmer days and better emotional regulation when they have access to predictable routines, trusted adults and safe spaces. This stability facilitates attendance, and for many pupils makes reintegration in mainstream lessons more achievable and successful. Interviewees also reported that pupils made measurable progress against their personalised goals, and many schools provided examples of accelerated gains when interventions were tightly aligned to the main curriculum and delivered consistently by trained staff.

Staff also described improvements in pupils' independence, engagement and confidence as a result of support from TAs and HLTAs. Where classrooms were calmer and pupils with higher level needs could access regulation support, schools felt other pupils benefitted too - fewer disruptions enabled teachers to maintain pace and pupils to maintain focus on their learning. Schools with strong inclusion cultures reported that other pupils show greater acceptance of difference.

Challenges and opportunities identified by schools

Across every model, schools interviewed reported systemic pressures that shaped their approach and how they utilised their workforce to meet the needs of pupils:

- increased volume and complexity of need in mainstream schools
- shortage of special school places
- shortfall in funding to deliver statutory requirements in Section F of EHC plans⁷
- uneven distribution of SEND across mainstream schools within LA areas
- staff recruitment and retention challenges leading to skills gaps and shortages
- reduced access to external professionals including SaLTs, EPs, OTs and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- balancing the needs of pupils with and without SEND with finite staffing, budgets and resources
- tension between current accountability frameworks and inclusion

In the view of the SEND experts and school staff interviewed, to deliver effective inclusive practice and 'break down barriers to opportunity' so that all children and young people can achieve and thrive at school, there needs to be:

- a national definition of inclusion and realistic expectations for mainstream schools
- initial teacher training with deep SEND content
- system-wide expectations that SEND is every member of the school workforce's responsibility
- high-quality, evidence-based professional development for all staff grounded in practical experience
- sufficient, ring-fenced funding to cover specialist input, staffing and adaptations to infrastructure
- strong teacher involvement in curriculum planning and assessment, irrespective of where learning takes place, and close alignment with mainstream provision
- national and local strategies to help attract and retain skilled staff, particularly TAs

⁷ The part of the EHC plan that specifies all the special educational provision a child or young person is legally entitled to.

- access to timely external professional support
- engagement with parents and pupils
- an accountability framework that recognises meaningful progress, not just attainment, and values inclusive practices
- strong partnership across schools, trusts and LAs to share expertise and distribute need more equitably

1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of research to address gaps in understanding about how mainstream schools support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Drawing on insight from sector experts, school leaders, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), teachers and support staff, the report identifies the key features of 4 overarching models of SEND provision: Mainstream only (Quality First Teaching (QFT⁸) with interventions); school-led support (support bases); local authority (LA)-funded specialist bases (SEN units and resource provision (RP)); and tiered support (combining all models). It explores how these models operate in practice in different phases and settings, the strategic and operational drivers of staffing decisions, and the barriers and enablers to the implementation of inclusive approaches.

Background and context

Over the last 10 years, the number of children and young people with SEND has steadily increased. By the end of the academic year 2024 to 2025, there were 1.7 million pupils on the special educational needs (SEN) register in England (19.6% of all pupils). Demand for specialist provision has grown in line with this increase. There are insufficient places to meet demand, however, with around two-thirds of special schools reported to be [at or over capacity](#). The shortage of special school places, along with a government shift towards greater inclusion within mainstream education for pupils with SEND, has led to an increase in the number of pupils – including those with higher level needs – in mainstream settings. The percentage of all pupils with an education, health and care (EHC) plan who are in mainstream settings now stands at 56.2%, up from 49% in 2015 to 2016.⁹

In line with the government's Opportunity Mission to 'help every child to achieve and thrive at school'¹⁰, mainstream schools are expected to develop inclusive, whole school approaches that enable all pupils to thrive and achieve positive outcomes. To achieve this aim, the government is enhancing the capacity of mainstream schools through adaptations to physical infrastructure¹¹ and the expansion of specialist units.¹² In addition, all teaching staff will have [access to training in SEND and inclusion](#). This will:

- build on existing DfE-funded qualifications and professional development in SEND, including:

⁸ Quality First Teaching (QFT) is a high-quality, inclusive approach to classroom teaching that ensures every pupil receives effective instruction tailored to their needs.

⁹ Official statistics for the academic year 2023 to 2024 – [Special educational needs in England](#).

¹⁰ DfE (2026) [Every Child achieving and Thriving](#).

¹¹ Press release 27 March 2025: [£740 million allocated for 10,000 new places for pupils with SEND](#).

¹² Press release, 11 February 2026: [10-year plan to revitalise schools and colleges for every child](#).

- universal SEND Services (USS)
- the [National Professional Qualification \(NPQ\) for SENCOs](#)
- complement the broader offer including
 - initial teacher training (ITT)
 - the [early career framework](#) (ECF), which took effect in September 2025
 - the wider suite of NPQs

These measures are designed to enhance the capability of mainstream schools to respond to the needs of pupils with SEND by upskilling staff at all levels.

Schools are developing creative ways to meet pupils' needs, including by adapting environments, curricula, teaching and learning methods and the utilisation of spaces within schools.¹³ While these approaches are understood, less is known about the ways in which staff are deployed to support their implementation. This research was designed to address this important gap and identify the features of effective workforce models for fostering inclusion and positive outcomes, to inform policy development and guidance on workforce deployment (to support SEND) in mainstream schools.

It is also important to note that the government was working on 2 significant policy documents at the same time as this research was being conducted:

- the consultation paper [SEND reform: putting children and young people first](#)
- the Schools White Paper [Every child achieving and thriving](#)

These documents set out proposed reforms to SEND support and wider education policy and were released after this research was completed in February 2026. The documents did not therefore influence participants' or the analysis presented in this report and findings do not reflect views of the government's current SEND reform proposals. The terminology used to describe different models of provision within the policy documents has, however, been adopted in this report to ensure consistency.

Research aims and objectives

Mainstream primary and secondary schools in England provided the focus for the research, which set out to address 4 key questions:

1. How is inclusivity for pupils with SEND defined and promoted?
2. What workforce models do mainstream schools use to support pupils with SEND?
 - a. What are the commonalities and differences between the approaches being implemented?

3. What are the drivers and influences shaping the development of approaches to deploying staff to support pupils with SEND in mainstream setting?
 - b. How is effectiveness monitored?
4. What would be needed to enable mainstream schools to more effectively support a greater number of pupils with SEND?

Approach

To address these research questions, the research was conducted in 2 phases, using primarily qualitative methods:

Phase 1: Scoping and mapping (May to July 2025)

At the outset of the research, to explore how pupils with SEND were being supported in mainstream settings and the barriers and enablers of inclusive practice, interviews were conducted with 12 SEND sector experts.¹⁴ Insight from these interviews informed the design of topic guides for subsequent interviews with mainstream primary and secondary school leaders and SENCOs. It also helped to map the models of SEND provision across mainstream settings and how staff within and external to the school workforce were being deployed to support pupil outcomes.

To inform the mapping exercise, a sample frame of schools was generated using a recall question on 2 DfE [School and College Voice surveys](#) which included questions on SEND provision, and a short recruitment survey developed by the research team. The recruitment survey was administered to all secondary schools and 60% of primary schools via the government's Notify system.¹⁵ A total of 656 primary and 383 secondary schools responded. Of these, 281 respondents in primary and 255 in secondary settings agreed to take part in a follow-up interview to explore their SEND provision and associated workforce model in more depth.

To inform the sampling, hard quotas were set for school phase.¹⁶ Soft quotas were applied, informed by school level data in Get Information About Schools (GIAS), the School Workforce Census (SWC) and information provided in the recruitment survey, to ensure a cross-section of schools was achieved, along with sufficient depth of insight into how different models adopted by schools operated. The models¹⁷ used to identify the

¹⁴ Sector experts were identified in collaboration with DfE and included regional directors, members of the neurodivergence task group, inclusion panel members, leaders in inclusion practice and academics working in the field of SEND and inclusion.

¹⁵ GOV.UK Notify is the UK government's official digital messaging service. It allows public sector organisations to send mass communications such as surveys, reminders, alerts, appointment messages and other official notifications.

¹⁶ Target of 80 primary and 60 secondary settings.

¹⁷ These were: 1. 'Formal provision' - schools recorded as having a LA recognised SEN unit and/or resource provision in GIAS; 2. 'Informal provision' – schools recorded as having a SEN unit and/or resource provision and/or special classes which is not formally recognised by the LA; and 3. Other provision – schools that are not recorded as having formal or informal provision in GIAS.

sample of schools were based on the secondary data available and differ from those developed during the mapping exercise based on insight from the research. The proportion of each model in the achieved sample is not representative of the sector as a whole.

In addition to model of provision, school selection took account of:

- proportion of pupils on SEN support and with an EHC plan
- staffing model, including ratio of pupils to teaching assistants (TAs) and use of staff with SEND specialisms
- proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM)
- geographical location

Individual or paired interviews were conducted with leaders and SENCOs in 142 schools implementing the 4 main models of provision, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample characteristics by phase and model of provision

Model	Number of primary schools	Number of secondary schools	Total
Mainstream only (QFT with interventions)	38	5	43
School-led support (support base)	28	35	63
LA-funded specialist bases (RP/SEN unit)	9	13	22
Tiered support (combination of school-led and LA-funded provision)	5	9	14
Total	80	62	142

The interviews explored the ways in which schools conceptualised ‘inclusion’ and how this shapes models of SEND provision and staff deployment. Wider drivers of staffing decisions were also considered, along with any challenges and barriers to the development of inclusive approaches and improving pupil outcomes.

The key findings from the mapping of SEND provision were captured in a matrix and presented to DfE staff and sector experts at a roundtable. The roundtable discussion considered the key features of 4 main models of provision, their respective strengths and limitations and any commonalities and differences. This discussion also informed the selection criteria for more detailed case study research with a sample of schools in phase 2.

Phase 2: Case study research (September to December 2025)

A total of 8 schools were selected as case studies to exemplify how the 4 main models of provision operate within primary and secondary school contexts. A further 4 schools were selected to illustrate the strategies that commonly underpin each of these models, which comprise:

- staff training and development
- whole school approaches
- TA deployment
- development of specialist provision

To inform the case studies, 34 leaders, SENCOs, teachers and support staff were interviewed across the 12 schools. Additional information and insight to inform the case studies was captured through interviews and written responses from staff.

Further details on the analysis are provided in [Appendix 1](#).

2 Defining and promoting inclusion

This chapter draws on insight from sector experts, school leaders and SENCOs to explore how inclusivity is defined and promoted in mainstream settings. The key features of an inclusive approach and how schools, irrespective of their model of provision, foster inclusivity is also explored. Subsequent chapters explore issues and challenges that affect the development, implementation and sustainability of inclusive approaches.

Defining inclusion

The government policy that provided the context for this research promoted inclusion and outlined a clear aspiration for children with SEND to be educated in their local mainstream schools. However, in its recent proposals for SEND reform, the government went further and set out system-wide plans designed to ensure more children with SEND can have their needs met in their local mainstream school. The reforms include substantial investment to expand inclusive provision, strengthen mainstream expertise and improve the support available within schools.¹⁸

In interviews, school leaders agreed that schools should serve their local communities by striving to meet the needs of all children. Equity and inclusion were reported to be the guiding principles for schools' strategies and SEND provision, underpinned by a belief that all pupils benefit from learning and interacting with others who have different skills, abilities and ways of being.

We've always been really passionate about not excluding children – believing that we have a shared responsibility with other services to get the right help for each child. It's very much been about changing and adapting what we do to meet the needs of our community. We buy into this idea that it's better for children to have their needs met in their community with their peers that they're going to grow up and live with. –
SENCO, primary setting

The way in which inclusion was conceived varied between settings. This variation influenced SEND provision, along with factors such as pupil need, workforce capability, funding and physical infrastructure. As a result, 'inclusion' manifested as 'embedded' at one end of the spectrum and 'separate' at the other. In the former, pupils typically had their needs met alongside their peers within the mainstream setting. In the latter, pupils with SEND spent all of their time in designated spaces on the school site.

In interview, sector experts debated whether approaches where children with SEND are supported separately (away from mainstream classes but on school grounds), were less

¹⁸ HM Government (2026) [SEND reform: putting children and young people first](#).

inclusive, with some expressing concerns that this risked limiting access to elements of school provision and opportunities to interact with a broader range of peers.

What actually is inclusion? Is it every child being in the same building or is it every child being part of the main school because contact and stigma theory is telling us that being in the building but separate and treated differently is very harmful. Nothing in our outcomes data so far is telling us that that approach is educationally valuable. – *Expert 3*

Some of the SENCOs interviewed emphasised the importance of peer-to-peer interaction and engagement with the full school offer as part of an inclusive approach for supporting social and emotional, as well as academic outcomes:

It's not always about academic support. For a lot of our students with SEND, it's about their emotional needs, their social skills. We want to ensure they have access to our enrichment clubs and wider experiences. We really do prioritise students' emotional well-being. – *SENCO, secondary setting.*

Staff and experts recognised the benefits of separate provision for pupil outcomes when it maximised the effectiveness of the support provided for pupils with higher needs and minimised the impact of disruptive or challenging behaviours on other pupils. A recognition of the benefits of separate provision underpins the government's recent announcement of its intention to ensure all secondary schools have an 'inclusion hub'.¹⁹

Where this works, the special provision room is set up so the environment suits the needs of pupils accessing it for interventions. It makes the children happier and calmer, rather than in the mainstream classes where they're too heightened. And so, they are better able to engage with their learning and not disrupting the rest of their class either.
– *Expert 1*

Experts, school leaders and SENCOs agreed that the current environment and curriculum in mainstream settings were inappropriate for some children and young people with very high or complex needs, and as a result, schools were unable to meet their needs effectively. They believed specialist provision was required to support positive outcomes for these pupils in such instances.

¹⁹ Press release, 11 February 2026: [10-year plan to revitalise schools and colleges for every child](#).

The government would say true, real inclusion is that everyone can go to their own local mainstream [school]. It's a very utopian, idealistic view. But what's so special about going to your local mainstream when there's more outstanding special schools and they are set up specifically to meet complex needs? Special schools are a really important part of the sector, and saying otherwise causes further stigma. – *Expert 2*

Ways schools currently foster inclusivity

This section describes several features of effective inclusion identified through the research that were highlighted by interviewees as working well in their schools

A whole school approach

School leaders, SENCOs and experts all explained how a 'whole school approach' is key to achieving a fully inclusive mainstream school environment. In this approach, inclusion is a 'golden thread' that runs through all aspects of school life, from its values, culture and ethos, through policies, systems and procedures, to the design of the curriculum and teaching practice. Whole school approaches seek to:

- create a sense of community where everyone feels they belong
- encourage awareness and acceptance of children's differences
- promote supporting pupils with SEND as a responsibility of all staff, not just the SENCO
- promote the concept that strategies designed to support pupils with SEND benefit all children
- celebrate the progress of each pupil from their individual starting point

Ensuring all staff understand pupils' needs and how to meet them was regarded by leaders and SENCOs as essential in this context. The research identified examples of how this was achieved in practice, including sharing individual education plans (IEPs) and behaviour plans and holding progress meetings for pupils with SEND where all staff attend. [Thematic case study 1](#) in Appendix 3 provides an example of how a whole school approach has been implemented.

The physical and sensory environment also fulfils an important role in the development of whole school approaches. Some pupils with SEND can find school environments overwhelming. This can lead to them becoming dysregulated and impact their capacity to engage effectively in learning. Leaders and SENCOs highlighted the ways in which their school environments and approaches to managing behaviour had been adapted to reduce cognitive overload and ensure they were more inclusive for all pupils, including:

- decluttering spaces and minimising stimuli on walls
- simplifying whiteboard presentations
- creating differentiated spaces within classrooms (such as calm corners) as well as in other areas of the school (for example, sensory rooms)
- providing access to equipment and allowing movement breaks
- adopting person-centred, non-confrontational approaches and low-arousal support strategies that focus on reducing stress and emotional escalation through calm, low-demand interactions.

Leadership of SEND

The senior leadership teams (SLTs) within individual schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs) were described as “anchors for inclusion”. In this role, they set the overarching vision and strategy for SEND and ensured it is considered in all aspects of school life, including workforce strategy and staff deployment.

Wider research into programmes such as PINS²⁰ (in primary schools) and [Difference Matters](#) (in secondary schools) has highlighted how external practitioners can work with school leaders to foster more inclusive approaches by reviewing SEND policies and conducting environmental and sensory audits, as well as delivering staff training (see next section).

Within MATs, responsibility for the funding, co-ordination and oversight of SEND was typically delegated to a ‘SEND Lead’ or ‘Senior SENCO’, to ensure common systems and inclusive approaches across the ‘family of schools’. SEND Leads and SENCOs were often members of SLTs and some undertook wider leadership responsibilities. In MATs and larger schools across both phases, it was common for SENCOs to report into an assistant head or director of inclusion. These roles also often managed pastoral and behaviour support to ensure a cohesive and inclusive approach to pupil support.

SENCOs emphasised the importance of senior management buy-in as an underpinning principle of effective SEND provision, irrespective of model of provision, to ensure pupils’ needs were prioritised and SENCOs were empowered to deploy staff and challenge practice, if required. Examples of effective leadership identified by the schools across the schools in the sample were:

- deep-dives led by SLT, which involved leaders tracking one SEN pupil across multiple lessons to shape targeted continuing professional development (CPD)

²⁰ CFE Research and Cordis Bright (2025) [Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools \(PINS\) interim evaluation report](#). Published online by DfE.

- senior leaders stepping into classrooms so that teachers could repair relationships with pupils following a dysregulation episode
- SEND-led timetabling whereby pupil needs determine how support staff are deployed and TAs, specialists, or other resources are reallocated in response to real-time changes in pupils' support requirements
- protected time each week for teachers to work directly with their pupils with SEND, including pre-teaching, over-teaching, pastoral check-ins and reviewing targets
- reduced class sizes to create the conditions for teachers to give more individual feedback and maintain direct relationships with pupils with SEND

The role of the SENCO

The day-to-day management of SEND, including the allocation of TAs and timetabling, often fell to the SENCO, irrespective of the model of provision in place. Their wider responsibilities typically included overseeing assessments and interventions, managing EHC plan processes and leading annual reviews, liaising with parents and external agencies, supporting teachers with adaptive practice, and monitoring pupil progress.

Leaders and SENCOs reported that both the scope and intensity of the SENCO role have increased substantially in the context of rising need. Around half of the schools in the sample had introduced a team-based SEND model, which included roles such as Deputy SENCOs, assistant SENCOs, SEND administrators, and/or specialist support officers. This shift was driven by the escalating volume of paperwork, particularly associated with EHC plans, caseload management and multiagency co-ordination, which leaders repeatedly described as “too much for one person”.

There was also evidence in larger secondaries of year leaders and subject departments taking active roles in leading, monitoring and embedding inclusive practice. Many had SEND post holders within each year group and/or SEND champions within subject teams, reflecting the scale and complexity of implementing tailored and responsive support for pupils with a range of SEND in these contexts. SENCOs in these settings worked closely with these roles, and subject and pastoral leaders, to co-ordinate provision.

Training and professional development for staff

To foster inclusive approaches to SEND, leaders aimed to model the behaviours they expected of other staff. Many reported that they (and governors in some instances) had engaged in training in SEND themselves, and all invested in the training and development of their wider workforce. A range of training and development was delivered across the schools in the sample. This included ‘generic’ training designed to raise awareness and understanding of SEND and support the development of ‘inclusive

mindsets'. This training was often targeted at all staff, irrespective of role, so that – as one leader put it, “everyone knows enough” to ensure pupils receive consistent support across the school day. This reflected a wider drive across the system to ensure expertise was shared, modelled and practised collectively rather than concentrated in a small number of individuals.

In addition, many schools were seeking to upskill teachers, and TAs in particular, to support pupils with specific SEND and to deliver strategies, approaches and interventions. To support QFT, schools delivered training in adaptive teaching. Schools with LA-funded specialist bases often drew on the expertise of staff located within this provision, who cascaded their specialist knowledge and insight to enhance support for pupils with SEND in mainstream or school-led provision. Training was also delivered by external practitioners, for example in communication, trauma-informed approaches attachment, anxiety, emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), behaviour, regulation and emotional literacy (see [Model 1 case study](#) in Appendix 2 and [Thematic case study 1](#) in Appendix 3) and interventions such as Elklan, colourful semantics, the Nuffield early language intervention (NELI), TEACCH and zones of regulation.²¹ SENCOs reported that input from external experts in particular conditions, approaches or interventions, was required to ensure staff understood which strategies to use, with whom and when, and also how to set realistic goals for pupils with SEND. As such, support from external professionals was increasingly an integral part of many schools' workforce models.

Training was perceived to be most effective when it was rooted in real-world examples. Teachers and TAs valued training to develop practical strategies they could implement in their practice and professional development rooted in pupil's needs, including modelling, coaching and collaborative problem solving through 'teach-meets',²² SEND-focused case discussion meetings and multi-disciplinary reviews.

Experts and school leaders perceived that inclusive practice could be further strengthened if ITT better prepared newly qualified teachers for the reality of working within inclusive mainstream contexts. They reported that trainee teachers need a better understanding of SEND, including the different conditions and diversity of needs they were likely to encounter, how these can present in the classroom and effective strategies for adapting teaching and supporting pupils' needs. They reflected that newly qualified teachers also need to understand what good outcomes look like so they can set

²¹ These approaches are widely-used, evidence-informed frameworks and programmes to support communication, language development, emotional regulation and the needs of neurodivergent pupils. Elklan provides accredited training for staff to support pupils with speech, language and communication needs. Colourful semantics uses colour-coded sentence structures to help children organise language and develop grammar. NELI is a structured programme to improve oral language in early years. TEACCH is a structured teaching approach developed for autistic learners. Zones of regulation is a framework that helps children recognise emotional states and develop coping strategies. These approaches typically sit alongside wider training on communication, trauma-informed practice, attachment, anxiety, EBSA behaviour and emotional literacy.

²² Teach meets are a teacher-led professional development event where educators come together to share ideas, swap practical teaching strategies, discuss challenges and collaborate on solutions.

appropriate learning goals and track the progress of pupils with SEND to ensure they do not set pupils up to fail or set too low expectations.

Deployment of TAs

Evidence from this study and previous research²³ demonstrates a shift in recent years in the role and responsibilities of TAs working in mainstream settings. Most TAs now spend the majority of their time supporting pupils with SEND, rather than providing general classroom-based support. However, across both primary and secondary phases, most schools interviewed had deliberately moved away from the so-called 'Velcro' model, whereby the same member of staff supports a pupil on a 1:1 basis each day, towards more flexible deployment whereby staff rotate and support different pupils. This was designed to reduce over-reliance on adult support and encourage independence among pupils, and to prevent burnout and protect the wellbeing of staff. How and where a TA was deployed depended on their skills and experience as well as staffing requirements. TAs were frequently re-deployed to respond to changing pupil needs and to cover staff absence.

Across different schools in the sample there was variation in the nature of the support provided by TAs, and the extent to which provision was planned, supervised and assessed by teachers, depending on the model of SEND provision in place. Innovative developments in TA deployment in support of inclusion were highlighted:

- a 'rotational roaming TA' model – TAs moved through several classrooms over the course of an hour, delivering short, high-value check-ins to multiple pupils
- a 'coaching rather than assisting' approach – well-intentioned 'assistance' was perceived to quickly undermine autonomy, but coaching, by contrast, supports metacognition, problem-solving and confidence
- 'academic' support assistants – graduates assigned to departments aligned to their degree subject, rather than the SEN team, to work with teachers in class and run small group re-teach, adapted homework and supported study sessions.

²³ CFE Research (2024) [Use of teaching assistants in schools](#). Research report.

TA deployment in a secondary school

This secondary school had a higher-than-average proportion of pupils with SEND, particularly social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and a growing number of pupils at risk of exclusion. The school established an LA-funded specialist base and 2 school-led Support Bases within its mainstream setting.

The LA-funded specialist base is a SEN unit for pupils with the most challenging behaviour or complex needs. Here, pupils are taught in a small, highly structured environment by subject teachers deployed from the mainstream workforce, supported by 2 higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) and a TA (who are based in the unit full time) and a behaviour manager. The intention is to reintegrate pupils back into mainstream lessons when appropriate. According to the SENCO, the continuity and structured support that the unit provides are essential for enabling successful reintegration.

The school also operates a nurture-style class for year 7 and 8 pupils with SEMH needs and/or very low attainment. This class is taught by a primary-trained teacher, supported by an in-class TA.

In addition to this, the school operates an academic hub, staffed by an HLTA who describes their role as a learning mentor. The school also has 5 TAs who deliver in-class support and targeted interventions. The model is designed to support consistency and relationship-building.

TAs are embedded within specialist classes and assigned to pupils with EHC plans in mainstream lessons. This model is contrasted with a different model of TA deployment in a secondary grammar school – see [Thematic Case Study 3](#) in Appendix 3.

Partnership and collaboration

To support inclusion, schools developed partnerships and networks with other schools in their trust and/or local area. The research uncovered examples of regular meetings between leaders and SENCOs to discuss SEND issues and share evidence and insight into effective strategies.

In our county, every term the primary and secondary schools have a meeting where we can talk about students anonymously or we can take consent from their families to talk about them and request some help and ideas for the support staff who are working closely with these students. – *SENCO, primary setting.*

Schools identified further scope for more formal partnerships so that expertise within mainstream specialist bases and special schools can be harnessed across local clusters, particularly in the context of the rising incidence of EBSA and SEMH needs. However, additional resources would be required to develop and sustain this activity.

It was also common for schools to come together to discuss specific pupils' needs at key transition points, particularly from primary to secondary school, to ensure appropriate support was in place before pupils arrive in year 7. Some schools in these networks conducted peer-to-peer observations and school reviews and inputted into the development of school improvement plans. Schools also engaged with stakeholders, such as LAs, through SEND forums. Schools believed these activities enhanced the quality and effectiveness of schools' inclusive mainstream provision.

Identification of pupil need

Although some pupils begin school with known SEND, for many pupils who attend mainstream settings, their needs emerged as they progressed through the education system. Across the schools in the sample, the staff most likely to identify pupils who could benefit from additional support were teachers and TAs. In primary schools, staff typically raised concerns directly with the SENCO based on observations and assessments of pupils in class and pupil behaviour. In secondary schools, it was more usual for staff to first raise concerns in meetings or via formal referral systems, triggered by pupil disengagement from lessons, failure to complete work or to meet classroom expectations.

To understand pupils' needs and identify the most appropriate support, SENCOs commonly implemented the 'assess-plan-do-review' process.²⁴ This could involve, for example, conducting observations, seeking feedback from teachers, other staff (e.g. pastoral teams) and parents, using screening and assessment tools²⁵ and trialling adaptations or short blocks of provision before considering whether further escalation was required. In many schools, processes for subsequently monitoring and reviewing pupils' needs were formalised through weekly 'teach-meets' focused on individual pupils and year team meetings whereby pastoral staff, year leaders and SEND teams collectively examined patterns. Schools reflected that these systems and processes, along with staff development on indicators of SEND, have led to needs being identified earlier and more effectively. The routine nature of discussions, and the emphasis on rapid, within-week adjustments, was perceived to mitigate the need for more formal interventions for some pupils.

²⁴ As detailed in the [SEND code of practice](#).

²⁵ For example: SNAP assessments – a tool that helps identify a child's strengths and areas of additional need across learning, behaviour, and social-emotional development; Boxall profiles - a standardised assessment and support tool for social, emotional and mental health needs in school-age children. or reading-age tests.

Relationships with parent carers

Parent carer engagement enabled schools to develop a more rounded understanding of pupils' needs (including how they manifest outside of school). Schools could then work with parent carers to jointly identify strategies for responding to those needs and set realistic expectations and goals. Experts and school leaders recognised that effective parent carer engagement is a key component of inclusion and this has been an element of national programmes such as PINS. Outside of schools' statutory requirement to consult with parent carers to develop EHC plans, the research highlighted ways in which schools engage parent carers to foster good relationships with them. These included consulting on IEPs, 'open door' policies for SENCOs and class teachers, parent carer feedback sessions, short, structured drop-in sessions or 'SEND surgeries' (where parents have the opportunity to meet with the SENCO or other SEND staff to discuss concerns, ask questions, review support, and receive tailored guidance about their child's needs), coffee mornings and information sessions (sometimes including input from external professionals).

3 Inclusive workforce models

The data and insight collected through the mapping exercise identified a range of different types of SEND provision with a direct effect on workforce deployment. All schools reported using QFT to meet the needs of pupils with SEND in lessons and, as such, this provided the foundation for all other models. Almost all schools implementing QFT provided additional support to pupils with SEND from TAs or HLTAs within mainstream classes. Many also provided short, focused interventions for these pupils outside the classroom. This model is referred to as ‘mainstream only’ throughout this report.

Just over two-fifths of the schools in the sample delivered school-led support (support bases), and around 1 in 7 had LA-funded specialist bases.²⁶ In practice, however, schools reported that the type of provision delivered frequently evolves in response to the needs of their cohort and the resources available. In some instances, this resulted in a ‘tiered approach’ combining both types of provision. The key features of each approach are summarised in Table 2 overleaf.

Each of the models is described in detail in this Chapter, drawing on insights from the interviews with school leaders, SENCOs and wider staff. The characteristics of the model and the pupils that access the provision, along with the ways in which it is resourced are explored. The key drivers for the approach, including staff deployment, along with barriers and challenges to implementation are also considered. The models and approach to staff deployment reflects common features of how schools interviewed in this research structured their workforce to support pupils with SEND and does not necessarily reflect best practice. Chapter 4 looks at systemic challenges and how this influenced schools’ approaches to workforce deployment. Detailed illustrative case studies of each model operating within a primary and secondary setting are presented in [Appendix 2](#).

²⁶ This does not reflect the sector as a whole. Schools with LA-funded Specialist Bases and delivering a tiered approach were oversampled to capture the depth of insight required for this research.

Table 2: Features of workforce models to support pupils with SEND

Mainstream only	Support base: School-led support	Specialist base: LA-funded support	Tiered support
• QFT operates in all schools • Teaching and learning is adapted in response to every pupil's needs • All teachers and support staff assume responsibility for SEND • Additional support in mainstream classes to ensure pupils with SEND can access the curriculum effectively • In some schools, withdrawal for adapted curriculum and short interventions	• Pupils requiring support for their SEND spend a proportion of time (up to 100%) outside mainstream classes • Academic and/or social and emotional support provided by a range of staff roles, in line with EHC plans • Support delivered in designated spaces, including provision similar in structure to specialist bases • Set up by schools with no additional dedicated funding	• Distinct provision commissioned and additionally funded by LAs • Pupils with specific SEND spend a proportion of time in RP (up to 50%) or SEN units (up to 100%) with other time spent in mainstream classes • Academic and/or social and emotional support provided by dedicated staff in line with EHC plans • Provision is delivered in a separate unit on school premises	• A blend of school-led and LA-funded approaches • Staffing deployed to meet statutory requirements of the specialist base, but staff are also used dynamically across provision, including in mainstream

Model 1: Mainstream only

The mainstream only approach is characterised by pupils with SEND being supported entirely within mainstream classes, without a support or specialist base or dedicated space in which they spend significant time away from their peers. Within this model, schools relied on QFT, including adaptive teaching and responsive classroom practice, as the foundation for meeting the needs of all learners. Additional SEND support was provided through short, timetabled interventions delivered on an individual or small group basis, but not as part of a distinct cohort or alternative provision.

Support staff, such as TAs and HLTAs, often played a vital role in supporting pupils with SEND in mainstream classes. They assisted teachers by further adapting set content, including using visuals and delivering short, structured support when specific barriers to learning were identified. This structured support could involve breaking tasks down or re-structuring tasks, rephrasing instructions and modelling steps, pre-teaching key vocabulary and/or checking understanding.

In most mainstream only schools, pupils typically remained in whole class teaching alongside their peers, with teachers introducing and modelling the learning. Any adapted or simplified tasks that followed were then usually supported by a TA. Some of the schools that participated in the research described using an adapted curriculum for small groups of pupils whose needs could not be met through classroom adjustments and scaffolding alone. Although teachers planned this, it was most commonly delivered by TAs, HLTAs or learning support assistants (LSAs) through short withdrawal sessions outside mainstream classrooms. A smaller number of schools described teachers working directly with pupils on adapted content, but this was less common. For example, in one primary school, a teacher adapted a year 6 history topic for a pupil who was working at a level equivalent to year 1 so they could focus on developing their vocabulary, sequencing and comprehension skills.

Schools often layered targeted interventions on top of QFT in response to specific pupil needs, including requirements set out in EHC plans. These interventions typically focused on areas such as phonics and reading fluency, numeracy gaps, spoken language and vocabulary, social communication and emotional or sensory regulation. To enable pupils to remain in mainstream classes for the majority of their day, leaders reported strategies such as adapting timetables and scheduling interventions at the 'edges' of the day (i.e. before school, during tutor time, at lunch or break time, or after school). Where this was not possible, schools rotated lesson withdrawal times so that pupils did not repeatedly miss the same subject.

Differences by phase

Among the schools that participated in the research, the mainstream only model was much more common in primary than secondary schools and there were clear differences

in implementation between phases. Secondary schools tended to rely on at least one additional space for short periods of pastoral support, regulation or academic intervention. In some instances, this space was accessed by individual pupils (rather than cohorts with SEND) on a time-limited basis. This may reflect structural differences between phases; secondary schools typically have larger cohorts, more movement across the school day, specialist subject teaching and higher levels of adolescent SEMH need than primary schools, making it harder to sustain an in-class mainstream only model.

We have sort of a learning support base... It's essentially a spare classroom... I'm not sure we're going to even have [it] next year because we don't have enough space... where we deliver interventions [only for pupils with an EHC plan]... We have a real focus on trying to keep kids in lessons because I think that they can very quickly fall behind if they're out of class. – *SENCO, secondary setting*

In secondary schools, adaptations and support were more closely aligned with and shaped by the demands of each subject, for example, pre-teaching scientific vocabulary or mathematical concepts. These sessions usually took place during tutor time, soft start periods, in timetabled intervention time (using a rolling timetable to avoid missing the same subject repeatedly) or immediately before the main lesson. They were predominantly delivered by TAs or, for more complex needs, by teachers or SENCOs. There was evidence that this process relied on TAs being briefed by teachers ahead of lessons and that pre-lesson TA-teacher communication was a necessary feature of supporting pupils to stay in mainstream classes.

A focus was also placed on supporting pupils to develop greater independence by key stage (KS) 4 so that pupils were prepared for post-16 learning.

In primary schools, adjustments were visible across the whole school day: school environments adapted to reduce overstimulation, calm corners or workstations, routine movement breaks, and predictable visualised structures. Interventions most commonly took place after lunch, with the morning preserved so that core subjects, such as literacy and numeracy, could be taught to all pupils in class.

What we've tried to do is level up our offer at universal level... that has helped us meet the needs of a lot of the children at SEN support and everyone else as well... we prefer everyone together rather than taking children with complex needs out. We've considered these 'unofficial units' but we don't have the space and we prefer mainstream inclusion. – *SENCO, primary setting*

Staff deployment

In the mainstream only model, staffing for interventions was drawn from the same pool of teachers and TAs who were deployed within the mainstream structure. While teachers were responsible for planning and delivering learning to the whole class, TAs and HLTAs typically delivered most of the targeted interventions outside lessons and provided structured, intentional prompts inside the classroom. Many support staff had developed recognised specialisms, such as precision teaching (where a pupil practises a specific skill in timed daily sessions, with performance tracked to ensure rapid, measurable progress), Elklan (speech and language development) and ELSA (emotional literacy).

Among the schools interviewed, primary schools tended to deploy TAs across classes and phases, while secondary schools often deployed small TA teams by subject or year group. Pastoral teams, such as learning mentors or family support roles, often worked alongside teaching staff and TAs to help pupils regulate emotionally or manage attendance. Most of the secondary schools in the sample had dedicated pastoral teams who ran structured programmes and covered high-friction times of the day, such as lunch and breaktimes. This capacity was more limited in primary schools, which tended to train staff to implement nurture practices in their wider role.

As in most settings, SEND provision was typically overseen by the SENCO. To ensure staff were equipped to implement the QFT approach and to ensure pupils' were being met effectively, SENCOs, along with other senior leaders, often ran staff training and development sessions and observed lessons and interventions. Schools drew on support from external professionals to assess specific needs and develop strategies and interventions, which staff implemented.

Mainstream only support in a primary school

This LA-maintained primary school in the South West was rated good by Ofsted. The school has approximately 600 pupils on roll with a below average proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals.

The proportion of pupils on the SEN register and with an EHC plan reflects the national average. The school, from leadership down, is committed to inclusion and aims to ensure equal opportunities for all pupils. They strongly believe that all children should have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. The school has high expectations of children with SEND and believes most can make good progress in the classroom learning alongside their peers, experiencing the full school offer.

Consideration of seating plans, movement breaks and support resources helps to make the environment inclusive. Class teachers adapt lessons to meet the needs of all pupils. The SENCO (who does not have a teaching role as well) ensures that teaching is adapted and scaffolded appropriately. Whereas previously they delivered a wide range of interventions to individual pupils, they now aim to support all pupils with EHC plans in mainstream classes. Support is planned by class teachers but delivered by TAs and 4 HLTAs along with light touch English and maths interventions and small group work during non-core lessons where capacity allows. Pupils who are working significantly below the level of their peers access a bespoke curriculum delivered within the same room as their class (this is not general intervention work; the TA delivers teacher-planned, personalised learning that has been adapted to the pupil's stage of development). If pupils become dysregulated, the TA takes them out of class. Because TAs primarily support children with EHC plans on a 1:1 basis, there are sometimes 2 in a class, while other classes do not have any additional support.

There are approximately 30 TAs and HLTAs at the school, along with 2 pastoral support staff employed on a part-time basis. They have responsibility for attendance and school avoidance.

A small group of pupils with cognitive, SEMH and personal care needs who cannot access mainstream learning on a full-time basis are on reduced timetables or are taught by TAs in spaces around the school with differentiated work set by their teacher. The school is considering whether they need to set up a dedicated space with resource to support these pupils.

Staff are trained by the SENCO and external providers, with trained staff members cascading their learning to colleagues.

See [Appendix 2](#) for further details on this primary setting and a case study of a [mainstream only secondary setting](#).

Key drivers

There are 3 key factors that drove the use of the mainstream only approach:

School ethos

For most schools, the underlying driver was a strongly held belief that all pupils should have the opportunity to learn in mainstream classrooms supported by qualified teachers. Leaders described their choice of the mainstream only model as both a principled and pragmatic decision. They expressed their commitment to ensuring pupils with SEND get the same quality experience as their peers, in line with their inclusive ethos, and reported that well-planned lessons were the most effective and sustainable way to meet pupils' needs, including requirements set out in EHC plans.

Profile of pupil needs

Leaders acknowledged that their SEND provision was shaped by the volume and profile of need within the school. Among the schools that took part in the research those operating a mainstream only approach typically had a lower proportion of pupils with EHC plans or with higher level or complex needs that required daily withdrawal for targeted intervention or regulation, access to bespoke timetables or access to dedicated spaces such as sensory rooms or nurture spaces. As a result, they could rely more heavily on in-class adaptive teaching than schools with a higher proportion of pupils with complex needs or EHC plans.

Although the proportion of pupils with an EHC plan is an unreliable measure of level of need, particularly in primary settings where children's needs are less likely to have been formally identified and diagnosed, most schools implementing this approach perceived that adaptive teaching, short interventions and well-timed support from TAs or pastoral staff were sufficient to respond to the needs of pupils. Most schools also highlighted that the profile of need changes with each new intake and can change within an academic year when children leave or join the school. Leaders therefore recognised that provision also needs to evolve in response. In some settings, this could mean the creation of a support base or specialist base in the future.

Capacity and resources

Leaders identified staffing as a key driver. They reported that the mainstream only approach provided flexibility to deploy staff across the school that enabled them to provide tailored support in class and deliver short interventions effectively and efficiently. Evidence from interviews suggests that staffing constraints were one of the main reasons some schools adopted a mainstream only model; several leaders reported limited TA capacity, part-time staffing and the inability to fund or staff a separate space, making in-class support the most feasible approach. However, it should be highlighted that this was not universal – as stated previously, a number of schools described a deliberate, values-

driven preference for keeping all pupils in mainstream classes and said they would not choose to operate a hub even if staffing allowed.

Challenges and considerations

Schools and experts identified a number of challenges associated with a mainstream only approach:

Rising number and complexity of SEND

There was consensus among leaders, SENCOs and sector experts interviewed that the volume of pupils with SEND had increased and that needs were becoming more complex. This presented a challenge in the context of the mainstream only model as it impacted the level of adaptation and type of support required, increased staff workload and placed further strain on resources. Experts reported that they were aware of schools that were finding it challenging to meet the rising level of need within a mainstream only model effectively, but the number of pupils with the same need (e.g. autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or speech, language and communication needs SLCN) was not sufficient to justify the creation of a support base. Leaders expressed concerns that some pupils' needs were no longer being met by this model. The shortage of special school places, where their needs could be better met, and lack of access to external professionals was reported to be exacerbating this challenge and was perceived to be impacting pupil wellbeing and leading to behaviour issues.

Integrating interventions into the school day

Leaders described the process of scheduling interventions around the school day to minimise the impact on mainstream learning for the pupils who attend them as a constant 'balancing act'. Some displacement of activities was inevitable, whether that was learning or opportunities to socialise with peers. Evidence from the interviews suggests that this 'balancing act' was more challenging for secondary schools. Their fixed timetables, subject-specialist teaching, and pupils moving between lessons created fewer opportunities to schedule short interventions without displacing mainstream learning. Primary schools also experienced similar challenges, but greater flexibility in how the school day is organised meant they could more easily integrate short or rotating interventions with less disruption.

Across both phases, the system was perceived to work only when the number of pupils requiring withdrawal was relatively small (largely because of staffing and space constraints) and the amount of time out of mainstream was limited. In mainstream only schools, 'withdrawal' typically refers to pupils spending short periods in small, multi-use intervention spaces, often rooms adjacent to or inside classrooms, rather than in a staffed hub or base. These spaces can support only a few pupils at a time, so the model

worked effectively only when relatively small numbers of pupils require brief, targeted withdrawal.

Capacity and resources

Mainstream only schools did not typically have high TA-to-pupil ratios and the dedicated teams found in SEN units or RP. The same pool of staff was required to cover adaptations in class, pre- and post-teaching, short interventions, regulated movement breaks and, in some cases, bespoke timetables for small groups of pupils. Staff deployment was under constant review and leaders described significant challenges associated with releasing staff for intervention blocks, assigning staff with the appropriate skills and expertise to meet specific pupil's needs, and avoiding overconcentrating support. Generalist TAs were sometimes expected to support a wide range of needs without specialist training. The shape of staffing was reported to change week to week depending on pupil attendance, engagement or emotional wellbeing, exacerbated by any unplanned staff absence. Fulfilling requirements in an EHC plan could be particularly challenging in this context.

Lack of physical space

Many of the schools with a mainstream only model lacked suitable rooms for quiet work, regulation or intervention, which constrained the provision they offered. Managing parental expectations was a related challenge, with some school staff reporting that parents expected their child with SEND to have access to more structured or separate provision.

Effectiveness

A key strength of this model identified by leaders, SENCOs and experts is that it ensured most pupils with SEND had equal access to high quality teaching from the same qualified teachers as their peers. Adapting teaching and resources in response to pupils' individual needs not only supported learning outcomes but also delivered opportunities for pupils with SEND to engage with a broad range of peers.

Most leaders interviewed judged their approach to be 'somewhat' or 'very' effective, evidenced by improved attendance, calmer classrooms and fewer dysregulated pupils. Wider impacts included stronger pupil engagement, improved confidence, greater independence and measurable academic progress when adaptations were closely aligned to the curriculum. Staff also felt that keeping pupils in mainstream for the majority of the school day helped maintain peer relationships and contributed to a stronger sense of belonging. Leaders described pupils that were more accepting and supportive of pupils with differences.

Among the schools that judged the mainstream only model to be partially effective, the most common factors behind this assessment were the increasing complexity and

volume of pupil need, limited staffing (particularly TA capacity), funding constraints and a lack of dedicated space for interventions or regulation. These schools explained that as needs intensified, the mainstream only model became harder to sustain.

Where the approach was considered effective, several leaders highlighted that the success of their approach was underpinned by a strong inclusive mindset among all staff, and described teams that were committed to upskilling, sharing strategies and working collectively.

Some schools reported that this model enabled them to provide effective SEN support, reducing the need to apply for an EHC plan. Consistent routines, early intervention and responsive teaching were perceived to have reduced the likelihood of pupils requiring more intensive provision. A number of schools had also received positive feedback from parents on the school environment, particularly in relation to welcoming and well-organised mainstream spaces.

However, the interviews suggested that the effectiveness of this approach was constrained by the profile of need as schools found it difficult to respond effectively to a high volume of diverse and/or complex needs in mainstream classes. Leaders also highlighted structural vulnerabilities, particularly where space, specialist capacity and/or access to external professionals is limited.

Future plans

In mainstream only settings, many leaders were planning to meet pupils' needs by strengthening classroom support rather than creating new support bases or alternative pathways. Several schools also planned to alter support staff allocation approaches. Some primary schools intended to reconsider TA deployment to respond to an anticipated increase in the number of children entering reception with communication delays and sensory needs. This included shifting from fixed, class-based TA allocation to more flexible, needs-led deployment; moving TAs into the early years foundation stage (EYFS) and Year 1 cohorts where the emerging profile of need was greatest; and redeploying additional adults into classes with multiple pupils who were non-verbal or working far below age expectations. Leaders also described plans to develop TA specialisms, for example in early language, sensory regulation, autism strategies, phonics, or Elklan-style communication approaches, and to use these specialist TAs to deliver targeted early language interventions and structured communication programmes designed by speech and language therapists. More schools intended to rotate TAs across classes to avoid single-adult dependency and ensure more staff were familiar with the strategies required for pupils with communication and sensory needs.

In the secondary phase, a couple of schools indicated that they were planning or had recently moved from generalist TA deployment by class to subject-specialist TAs (see [Thematic case study 3](#) on TA deployment in Appendix 3 for further details). Some of the

secondary schools were also moving towards more devolved models of leadership designed to empower heads of department to determine how and where adult support is deployed.

Another emerging pattern was plans to strengthen teacher capacity in the long term. In one secondary school, leaders explained that they planned not to replace TA posts when staff leave. Instead, they intended to appoint more qualified teachers in core subjects such as mathematics, English and science. The goal was to reduce class sizes so that teachers can be more responsive to pupils' needs.

Primary settings planned to continue to use small group TA-led withdrawal where short bursts of targeted work are needed. Indeed, leaders were planning to continue TA-delivered interventions but with better targeting and clearer expectations about duration and purpose.

One mainstream only primary reported that it was pursuing RP and working with the LA to establish an 8-place unit from September 2026 housed in an existing prefab building on the school grounds. Another mainstream only primary had actively considered hosting RP but did not pursue it because of concerns that it would increase demand for SEND provision within the school and lead to a loss of control over delivery.

A small number of mainstream only schools explained that they had intentionally avoided establishing a school-led support base because the examples they had observed locally that comprised pupils with diverse or incompatible needs had resulted in high levels of dysregulation and limited impact on learning. Leaders felt that without a clearly defined cohort or specialist staffing, such Bases risked becoming 'catchall' spaces that were less effective than mainstream classrooms where pupils were well supported.

Taken together, these pressures suggest that mainstream only schools will continue to rely on classroom-based provision but must refine their allocation systems, increase the specialist skill of TAs and bolster teacher capacity in order to continue to effectively meet the needs of pupils with SEND.

Model 2: Support base: School-led support

School-led provision builds on the mainstream only model with additional stand-alone SEND-specific support. This model is not funded or overseen by the LA but rather is resourced through a combination of school budgets and the funding attached to EHC plans. It is best understood as a spectrum, rather than a single model, because schools implement it with varying degrees of structure. At one end of the spectrum, it is more difficult to discern the difference between school-led and mainstream only, particularly where ad hoc calm spaces or unstaffed regulation rooms are in place, but in the context of this report, the distinguishing feature of school-led support is having a recognisable, staffed space outside of mainstream classrooms where more substantially adapted timetables are delivered and cohorts of pupils have timetabled access. These have been referred to as 'support bases' in the recent Schools White Paper [Every child achieving and thriving](#). Irrespective of the size and nature of this space, school-led provision always represents an extra layer of support on top of what is delivered solely through classroom differentiation and short interventions. As such, it supports pupils (with or without an EHC plan) whose needs cannot be fully met in mainstream classes and who, due to their needs, find it difficult to access the same learning and/or environments as their peers. The reasons and key drivers for schools forming support bases are explored later in this section.

Characteristics of school-led support

There were 2 distinct sub-models of school-led support that emerged through the research: timetabled spaces and intensive support.

Timetabled spaces

The first, and by far the most common form of this model, was timetabled intervention spaces run by trained support staff (which included HLTAs, TAs and pastoral staff or wellbeing/emotional literacy workers). Around three-quarters of schools identified as having school-led support implemented this approach. Some of these spaces, particularly in primary schools, were repurposed rooms rather than purpose-built units, which were also used for breakfast clubs, afterschool clubs, staff offices and music tuition. Others had more distinct identities, such as a 'pod', 'learning garden', 'nurture room' or 'academic hub'. In secondary settings, school-led provision tended to be spatially larger and more differentiated, often comprising a cluster of rooms rather than a single hub. This space was also used flexibly for various purposes including breakfast clubs, lunchtime groups, small group teaching and quiet break space.

Pupils attended these spaces for planned blocks of targeted input, support or regulation but spent the majority of their time in mainstream lessons. Some spaces also operated as drop-in places, offering soft starts (for example, for pupils with EBSA, anxiety or social

and emotional issues), sensory spaces for pupils to regulate, or a quiet space with fewer distractions for pupils to work in and/or receive support on an ad hoc basis.

Patterns of attendance differed according to pupil need across both primary and secondary phases. In primary settings, some pupils spent a significant proportion of time (e.g. mornings) each day in support bases for support with literacy and numeracy. Others (e.g. with sensory needs) attended for short periods for highly structured activities designed to help pupils regulate their sensory systems so they were calm, focused and ready to learn. These included movement-based activities, deep pressure input or access to sensory equipment. Some schools organised access around specific parts of the timetable where pupils struggled most; in others, access was permission-based and was monitored by staff.

In secondary schools, patterns were similarly varied. Some operated partial timetables, with a core group spending around 10 hours per week in the support base and the rest of their time in mainstream classes. A minority offered nurture or 're-engage' rooms for longer periods, usually linked to SEMH needs.

The number of pupils accessing this model of provision varied between and within schools but was typically higher than the number who attended more structured provision for support with higher level needs for most or all of the school day (as set out below).

Intensive support

In the second sub-model, identified by around one-third of schools with school-led support, the support base was similar in structure to an LA-funded specialist base and was led by a teacher, SENCO or specialist HLTA. This base was commonly used to support pupils with higher level needs, such as SLCN, moderate learning difficulties, significant SEMH needs and behaviour linked to underlying SEND. Pupils awaiting specialist placements also attended this provision. In a small number of schools, these bases operated as what leaders and SENCOs referred to as 'internal alternative provision' and which DfE classifies as support bases. The pupils who attended these bases were often those at risk of exclusion or with an EHC plan that specified the need for alternative provision or a fully bespoke curriculum.

Pupils accessed the support base in small groups for a substantial proportion of their day, although group sizes varied according to need profile and phase of education. Groups tended to be smaller, with higher staff ratios in primary settings, particularly when they were supporting pupils who were non-verbal or had significant SLCN or sensory needs. In one example, 3 TAs supported 5 pupils to ensure their safety and deliver personalised learning. Larger units in primary schools supported 8 to 10 pupils.

In secondary schools, intensive school-led support spanned a wider range of group sizes. Smaller intervention or nurture groups contained 8 to 12 pupils, supported by

around 3 staff (usually 2 to 3 TAs). Where pupils spent most the school day within the base, groups typically comprised 12 to 15 pupils but staffing ratios were the same.

A minority of schools allocated multiple spaces for year-group or need-specific support. Pupils in years 7 to 9 were most likely to access small group or nurture provision, reflecting the need for transition support, regulation and foundational learning in the early secondary phase. Schools reported that they aimed to reintegrate the majority of pupils into mainstream by the end of year 9, with those in KS3 cognition-and-learning sets²⁷ or EBSA provision being the exceptions. Therefore, it was less common for pupils to spend extended periods of time in nurture style hubs from year 10. School-led support in KS4 was typically more curriculum-focused but was highly differentiated for those who still needed it at this stage (e.g. pupils not sitting the full range of GCSEs); differentiated provision included functional skills, ASDAN²⁸, life skills modules, community-based learning and supported work placements.

Wednesday, they have a life skills programme; Thursday and Friday they do extended work placements. – *Leader, secondary setting*

Staff deployment

Most leaders allocated staff from existing teams rather than establishing a standalone workforce for their support bases. However, to strengthen capacity, a minority of schools had appointed additional staff, including teachers and/or TAs with experience in early years, specific learning disabilities or SEMH settings. Some used temporary or supply staff as a flexible resource to alleviate resourcing issues.

Staff deployment was subsequently determined by the scale and intensity of the provision. However, it was common for support staff to be deployed flexibly across both mainstream and school-led provision, sometimes supporting the same pupils in both settings. As such they were frequently required to perform dual roles, combining specialist work with general classroom support for pupils with SEND. This required staff to operate flexibly and draw on a wider range of expertise than those working in schools with mainstream only models.

Timetabled spaces

Although SENCOs often maintained oversight of timetabled spaces, those with a pastoral focus were commonly led by an HLTA or inclusion manager and behaviour, SEMH and regulation spaces were often TA-led.

Activities within this provision were typically delivered by TAs, HLTAs and pastoral staff. In secondary schools, the staff delivering school-led provision were often referred to as

²⁷ A small, specialist class for pupils with significant learning difficulties

²⁸ An education charity and awarding organisation offering courses, accredited curriculum programmes and UK-regulated qualifications to learners working from pre-entry to level 3.

LSAs. These roles were described by leaders as more specialist and highly trained, sometimes to qualified teacher status (QTS) or therapeutic intervention level. These staff frequently led targeted interventions linked to subject teaching, such as guided reading, catch-up literacy and numeracy, and structured programmes like the Literacy Intervention Toolkit; they also contributed to pupil assessment and quality assurance, and/or acted as key adults for pupils.

Although subject teachers rarely provided direct teaching input, learning activities were still tightly aligned to the mainstream offer. Class teachers provided planning guidance and retained responsibility for assessment and expectation-setting in both primary and secondary settings.

Intensive support

School-led bases delivering more intensive support often closely mirrored the structure and function of LA-funded specialist bases. A qualified teacher typically led this provision, overseeing the curriculum, planning and adaptations. Where this was not the case, the base was typically co-ordinated and managed by the SENCO (or assistant SENCO). Subject teachers contributed planning guidance and curriculum oversight but experienced TAs or HLTAs were responsible for day-to-day delivery. These TAs/HLTAs often had specialist training in autism, communication or SEMH and were sometimes supported by pastoral staff.

Teachers are expected to plan for them based on what they've been learning in their pod sessions... teachers still do assessments, teachers still do target setting. – *Leader, primary setting*

Across both primary and secondary schools, pupils typically followed an alternative curriculum or specialised pathway tailored to their developmental level and needs. Where pupils were significantly behind their age expected learning, differentiation was substantial, with pupils working to different year group expectations but still within mainstream subject frameworks. For example, intensive support provision for a small group of preverbal children and pupils with significant SLCN in one of the primary schools in the sample received short bursts of guided learning interspersed with sensory activities:

2 minutes guided activity, 5 minutes sensory, then back to guided activity. – *Leader, primary school*

For this reason, staff leading this type of support base in secondary schools were often specialists in the primary phase.

Support bases referred to by schools as 'internal alternative provision' were led by an adult with qualifications or expertise in supporting pupils with challenging behaviour, supported by a TA with similar experience. Bases supporting pupils at risk of exclusion or

on alternative pathways were described as operating largely separately, with only a small number of pupils accessing selected mainstream GCSE subjects. Some pupils in these settings spent all their time within the school's support base, while others combined it with alternative provision off site.

Staff to pupil ratios were higher within intensive school-led provision than in provision delivered in timetabled spaces and mainstream only. To ensure an appropriate level of staffing, leaders explained that because of resource constraints, they often had to re-assign staff who had been deployed elsewhere to the support base. These decisions were driven by necessity rather than design and were not always optimal, particularly when they reduced the in-class support available for pupils within mainstream.

Support base in a secondary school

Approximately one-quarter of the pupils in this large secondary school are on the SEN register and 3% have EHC plans. The school aims to support all pupils through a mainstream only approach, but it also provides school-led provision for a group of pupils in years 7 to 9 who need teaching at a different pace and pitch and more differentiation than can be delivered in mainstream classes.

Around 30 pupils per year group access the support base for 10 hours per week. They move in and out of the supported environment seamlessly and because they study the same subjects at the same time as their peers, remain fully integrated with mainstream provision. Pupils can also use the space at breakfast and lunchtimes.

The support base is staffed by 4 qualified teachers who have degrees or postgraduate degrees that developed specialist knowledge in SEND and a primary-trained teacher. These staff work across the whole school, not just in the provision. The provision is viewed by staff as an extension to mainstream rather than something separate. TAs only assist pupils in the provision if they have physical or sensory issues that require a specific adult to be with them.

TAs are used to support other pupils across the whole school in lessons. They 'roam', checking pupils with SEND are on task and provide additional prompting and support if needed. Those who need it receive some small group teaching and interventions delivered by a trained TA.

A pastoral team support pupils who become dysregulated, although the school reports few incidences because of consistent behaviour expectations and a calm environment. Pupils can take 'learning breaks' which are accompanied by a member of staff to ensure this time is used purposefully.

A more detailed version of this case study is provided in [Appendix 2](#) along with a case study of school-led support in a [primary setting](#).

Key drivers

Evolving profile of pupil need

There was agreement among leaders and SENCOs interviewed that the number of pupils with SEND, particularly those with autism, SEMH and SLCN, had increased over recent years. More pupils were finding it difficult to cope in “loud, busy classrooms” and, as a result, were becoming distressed or dysregulated and less able to learn effectively. Attempts to retain and support pupils in mainstream classrooms under these circumstances were perceived to be exacerbating behaviour issues and affecting the learning and potential safety of other pupils. Leaders also described an increase in the number of pupils who gave the impression of being settled and engaged in learning but who were in fact “lost”, “floating” or just copying peers.

This changing profile of pupil need was the key driver for both the initial development and subsequent expansion of school-led provision within many of the schools that participated in the research. There was consensus among leaders across both phases that their provision was a response to the needs of the children and young people in their local communities rather than a pre-planned structural choice. It was regarded as the only viable approach for supporting the learning and wellbeing of some pupils with SEND within a mainstream context and it evolved each year, shaped by the cohort.

Shortage of specialist placements

Several leaders explicitly cited the lack of available special school places as a key driver for setting up their support base. Provision was established to enable schools to support pupils with the highest level of need, including profound SLCN, extreme dysregulation and significant medical needs, on a permanent basis or while a suitable specialist placement was found. To strengthen their capacity and to ensure pupils received the appropriate level of support, these schools sought to recruit teachers with special school experience and/or specialist training in specific SEND. This was not always achieved, however (see [Challenges and considerations](#) below).

Schools with school-led provision were more likely than those operating specialist bases or tiered models to have fostered strong relationships with special schools. One likely reason is that these schools typically lacked embedded specialist capacity, so they relied more on external special school expertise to support their practice. This is reflected in comments like the one below:

[We have] a very, very strong link with the local special school... they have offered to come out and look at our space. – *SENCO, primary setting*

Capacity and resources

Support bases are not commissioned by LAs and there is no additional funding for schools to support their implementation. Provision was therefore shaped, not only by pupil need, but by what schools could deliver and sustain with the available funding and existing workforce skills and capacity.

Challenges and considerations

Physical infrastructure

Many of the timetabled spaces, particularly within primary schools, were utilised for other activities in addition to SEND support. As a result, staff resources were absorbed in setting up and clearing down spaces and specialised equipment and adjusting environments to ensure they were safe and suitable for use by pupils with SEND. When cohorts grow or the profile of needs becomes more complex, schools have relocated their provision to more suitable accommodation, such as demountables²⁹ or larger rooms with accessible toilets, changing facilities and access to outdoor space. Not all schools have infrastructure to do this however, and a few schools had encountered barriers to expanding their buildings.

A degree of uncertainty about the number of pupils that are likely to require school-led provision, and changes in numbers within an academic year, means spaces were underutilised at some times and there were shortages of space at others. Therefore, the management of space can present a key challenge for schools implementing support bases and has resource implications.

Optimising group sizes

While schools delivering the mainstream only model often lacked the critical mass of pupils with similar needs to create a support base, schools with school-led provision could experience the opposite challenge. Leaders and SENCOs described how this model can break down when groups become too large or when multiple pupils with very challenging behaviours are placed together. Maintaining manageable group sizes and carefully balanced cohorts was an ongoing challenge for many schools with this model. While schools did not always define an ideal size, the interview data indicate that leaders generally considered small groups of 6 to 8 pupils to be most manageable for intensive provision. Groups of 8 to 12 were described as workable but resources were more stretched, particularly where needs were complex. Once groups approached 12 to 15 pupils, leaders said the model was less effective due to insufficient staffing, behavioural pressures and the difficulty of maintaining balanced cohorts. Furthermore, the physical size and layout of a support base affected how manageable the model was. Settings with multiple rooms, such as one or more teaching rooms, sensory spaces and quiet or

²⁹ A demountable is a prefabricated, portable classroom building located on the school site.

regulation rooms, were able to split the cohort into several smaller groups of around 6 to 8 pupils. By contrast, single room Bases often struggled to keep groups small or to separate pupils with conflicting needs.

Staff recruitment and retention

Staffing levels, particularly at the more structured end of this model, were sometimes perceived to be sub-optimal, and there was a shortage of specialist skills in some settings. Despite funding constraints, some schools had sought to appoint more staff with SEND specialisms, to bolster capacity but were experiencing recruitment challenges. In one secondary setting, in an attempt to attract more suitable applicants, the leader had “rebranded the post of TA” as LSA to reflect the additional requirements and expectations of the role and to foster a stronger professional identity.³⁰

Leaders repeatedly referred to the emotional and physical toll on staff caused by supporting highly dysregulated and high-needs pupils. One school leader described members of their workforce as being “on their knees” and, as a consequence, some had chosen to leave. Other schools reported that not all TA/LSAs were willing or able to work in support bases. For example, leaders reported that some TAs/LSAs did not feel sufficiently confident or trained to manage pupils with this level of need, while others preferred classroom based roles where the demands were more predictable. This reduced flexibility within the workforce and resulted in staff deployment challenges.

Effectiveness

Despite difficulties recruiting and retaining staff with the skills and confidence to work with pupils with high needs, the vast majority of schools considered their support bases to be effective. In order to respond effectively to pupils’ needs, space was used flexibly and creatively. Whether located in a single repurposed room or a multiroom SEND suite, these spaces function not only as teaching areas but also as places for regulation, care, communication, sensory input, social connection and safe withdrawal.

Some leaders and SENCOs reported that a key benefit of a stand-alone base is that it ensured pupils with higher needs can be supported without disrupting learning within mainstream classes, thus supporting outcomes for all learners. A further benefit of this approach was that pupils could move between provision in response to need. However, this movement was reported to create staffing challenges and increase the risk of disruption to learning, both for pupils withdrawing from and pupils remaining in mainstream classes. Minimising this risk placed an additional requirement on staff to manage pupil behaviour and the level and timing of movement.

³⁰ There was no evidence in this interview that these roles were paid more than TAs or had the contractual status of a HLTA

As in schools using other models, leaders often measured the success of their school-led provision in terms of pupil progress. In primary settings, leaders were keen to emphasise that although pupils may not make “big steps” they do make clear, trackable progress against personalised targets, which schools were able to measure more reliably in smaller, more structured settings. In secondary schools, interviewees provided examples of quantified academic gains, particularly in literacy. One school reported that year 7 pupils who accessed the support base had made the equivalent of 12 months’ progress in reading over an academic year, rising to 14.5 months for pupils eligible for FSM, measured through reading age assessments.

Reintegration into mainstream was a key outcome measure. When pupils make a successful transition following periods in the support base, SENCOs described this as a “huge success”.

Beyond academic attainment, schools attributed improvements in attendance, engagement and behaviour to their school-led provision. One secondary school reported increases of 15% to 20% in attendance among pupils accessing their ‘re-engage’ provision, alongside reductions in suspension rates. Another described their model as “expensive but effective” precisely because it helped to achieve good outcomes for pupils who would otherwise disengage from education, including because of exclusion.

Similar benefits were observed in primary settings. One leader reported that none of the pupils who attended their hub had been excluded and attendance had improved. Leaders repeatedly referred to pupils as being “happier,” “more settled” and “more willing to engage” when they were supported in a smaller, calmer environment.

Future plans

Schools reported that they would continue to evolve and expand their school-led provision in response to changing needs. In primary settings, the focus for future provision was on sensory and SLCN needs. Leaders explained that a growing number of pupils required “a broader sensory curriculum”, involving structured sensory-based learning and regulation activities, such as sensory circuits, movement breaks, sensory room access and experiential learning designed to help pupils regulate and feel safe to access education. One SENCO said that their pupils “deserved a lovely calm dedicated space”.

In secondary schools, the increasing number of pupils presenting with high anxiety and EBSA was driving leaders to consider:

- the development of stand-alone Bases, separate from main buildings for pupils with EBSA
- in-house online learning delivered by staff who pupils already know and trust

- gradual reintegration plans linked to a consistent adult

As one school leader explained, neither their existing base nor their main building were suitable for pupils with EBSA because the physical environments were too overwhelming and were acting as a barrier to effective support.

We can't support pupils if [we] cannot get into the building at all. –

Leader, secondary setting

Some schools with school-led provision were considering setting up specialist bases. One primary school was working with the LA to establish an 8-place targeted specialist base from September 2026 in an existing prefab building. A secondary school had created the space, re-deployed staff and re-organised their timetable in readiness for a specialist base. Limited capacity within the LA was reported to be impacting the timeline for opening this provision, however.

The appetite among other schools to evolve their provision into an LA-funded specialist base in the future was more limited. Reflecting the view of the mainstream only primary that had considered but dismissed the opportunity to develop a specialist base (see [Model 1](#)), these leaders wanted to retain local control of their spaces and expressed concern that if they converted to LA-funded provision access for current pupils could be reduced and/or they may be required to admit pupils with needs that the school was less equipped to meet. Some leaders had also been deterred by the impacts on staff and resourcing they had observed in other schools that had created specialist bases.

Model 3: Specialist base: LA-funded SEN units and RP

Specialist bases represent a more structured and specialist approach to supporting pupils with SEND within mainstream schools. Unlike support bases (school-led provision), specialist bases are commissioned, funded and overseen by the LA. Pupils are therefore drawn from across the LA and not just from a school's immediate catchment area. Specialist bases are typically established in response to local demand and to meet specific types of need, such as autism, speech and language problems, hearing impairment, or profound learning difficulties. Pupils are usually on roll at the mainstream school that delivers the specialist base. They often access a bespoke curriculum delivered within a dedicated building. All pupils allocated a place in a specialist base have an EHC plan.

Specialist bases include SEN units and RP. DfE distinguishes between these provisions by how much time pupils spend in mainstream classes. When pupils spend more than half their time in mainstream classes and attend specialist bases for short interventions, provision is defined as RP; when pupils are taught mainly or entirely in the specialist base, provision is defined as a SEN unit. In practice, the proportion of time individual pupils attend specialist bases can fluctuate day-to-day, and within cohorts attending the same provision there may be some pupils who attend for most the day and others who attend for only short periods of time.

Characteristics of specialist bases

Specialist bases were described by school leaders as co-located on the sites of mainstream schools in an identifiable building rather than in rooms or ad hoc spaces within main school buildings. These Bases are intended for multi-purpose use to facilitate the delivery of specialist programmes and support. For example, specialist bases often have a sensory room for regulation and de-escalation. Offices double as quiet spaces for work with therapists, and there are storage facilities for equipment. Some provision also incorporates clinical and care facilities (e.g. wet rooms).

Need profile of pupils

Among the schools operating this model, the number of pupils supported in specialist bases varied substantially across both primary and secondary phases, correlating with local level of need. The spectrum of needs of pupils accessing specialist bases also varied. Leaders emphasised that the overall level of need was typically higher than for pupils with an EHC plan supported in mainstream, but not high enough to meet local thresholds for a special school placement. Some, however, reported that the boundaries between specialist bases and external (non-mainstream) specialist provision have blurred as local capacity has tightened.

Funded places for pupils within specialist bases are determined through LA processes and not by schools. Pupils are identified for LA-funded places through a statutory consultation process, which is often conducted at key transition points (for example, year 6 to year 7). During this process, schools make a professional judgement about whether they can appropriately meet a pupil's needs, taking account of:

- the primary need specified in the EHC plan
- whether the provision required in Section F³¹ could be delivered appropriately within the school's specialist base
- whether admitting the pupil would be compatible with the specialist base's curriculum and delivery model, and with the efficient education of other pupils
- the pupil's capacity to engage with the curriculum model offered by the specialist base

Although specialist bases are still often commissioned to respond to a specific need (e.g. autism, moderate learning difficulties, or cognition and learning), schools often reported that these labels no longer reflected the profile of needs. Several leaders noted that their LA service-level agreements had been revised to better align with demand in recent years; in practice, specialist bases were now addressing a range of co-occurring needs such as communication, cognition and SEMH simultaneously, as well as supporting pupils with a combination of needs (e.g. speech and language with ASD).

Our [base] is cognition and learning... but with the complexity of need at the minute, which doesn't really mean a lot anymore. – *SENCO, primary setting.*

Number of pupils

Several primary schools in the sample had large specialist bases with a minimum of 30 commissioned places. While some supported pupils with a range of needs specified in EHC plans, others were described as autism or communication focused. Several schools indicated that the number of places within these larger Bases had increased year-on-year, with one specialist base now supporting 50 pupils. At the other end of the scale were primary schools delivering support to between 5 and 20 pupils, with a focus on more profound SLCN and SEMH.

Amongst the secondary schools interviewed, cohorts ranged from 8 to 45 pupils. As in primary settings, smaller provision was often more specialised. For example, one school supported 8 pupils at risk of permanent exclusion in what they referred to as an 'Enhanced Provision Unit', while another had 10 LA-funded places for pupils with SLCN. Secondary school leaders also reported that the number of LA-commissioned places in

³¹ The part of the EHC plan that specifies all the special educational provision a child or young person is legally entitled to.

their specialist base increased year-on-year. For example, the number of places per year group in one specialist base had risen from 2 to 5 and had merged with a parallel outreach provision to accommodate the rise in demand.

Curriculum delivery

Although the number of places commissioned is set by year group, specialist bases typically group pupils by need and stage of development rather than by chronological age. In both primary and secondary settings, EHC plan Section F outcomes shaped what pupils accessed,³² how content was delivered, and how time was allocated between curriculum and intervention. Pupils' timetables were individualised and aligned with age-appropriate expectations and they were reviewed as pupils' needs evolved.

Within specialist bases in primary settings, daily timetables were commonly described as "structured" and "predictable", closely mirroring mainstream curriculum frameworks and routines. Afternoons were often reserved for targeted interventions linked to EHC plan outcomes. In secondary schools, the curriculum delivered in the specialist base was also aligned to mainstream to ensure pupils had access to a full, statutory entitlement. Reflecting more structured, school-led provision, personalisation included selective withdrawal for small group or one-to-one teaching in English and maths to address gaps in knowledge and understanding, alongside interventions specified in EHC plans. In KS3, for example, this sometimes included elements of the primary curriculum for pupils with cognitive delay. In KS4, schools often developed blended pathways combining entry-level qualifications, GCSEs, vocational qualifications and/or life skills programmes.

In both phases, specialist curricula and approaches were sometimes used with pupils with the highest level of need. A number of schools in the sample worked in partnership with specialist settings, drawing on their expertise and insight into good practice when designing provision. Leaders and SENCOs also consistently emphasised the importance of enrichment opportunities for pupils attending specialist bases and offered trips.

Balance between specialist and mainstream provision

The balance of time spent within specialist bases and mainstream often varies according to need and evolves over time. As in schools with school-led provision, the goal was often to increase the amount of time pupils spend in mainstream as they progress through the different key stages and phases of education, whenever possible.

Specialist bases were commonly described as "the main focus" for most pupils with a LA-funded placement. In some schools, pupils with the most complex needs could spend all of their time within the base (SEN unit), while others accessed mainstream in carefully

³² Section F of an EHC plan specifies the provision required to meet a child or young person's needs set out in Section B of the plan. It is legally binding, meaning the LA must ensure this provision is delivered.

planned ways for a small proportion of the time, for example, one hour per week, or for subjects aligned to their strengths or for particular activities or events (e.g. PE or assemblies). Leaders stressed that this access is carefully scaffolded and is reviewed frequently. In other schools, it was reported that pupils spend most of their time in mainstream and access the base (RP) for small group interventions or to meet specific requirements in EHC plans only.

Leaders strongly emphasised that specialist bases are not intended to be a permanent destination for most pupils, recognising that the purpose is instead to stabilise learning, build skills and support a gradual transition to mainstream lessons wherever possible. By the secondary phase, it was common for leaders to report that pupils spent the majority of time in mainstream classes, with withdrawal to RP at specified times and for specific activities. Withdrawal typically took place during particular subjects (often languages or humanities that pupils found difficult to engage with) to minimise disruption to core subjects such as English and maths. In some settings, minimum mainstream attendance thresholds were linked to commissioning or therapy arrangements.

To ensure pupils are effectively supported during their time in mainstream and to identify when extra support is required, schools used a combination of classroom observations, progress checks, behaviour and attendance information, and discussions between teachers and SEND leaders. One-page pupil profiles helped to ensure key information was shared between staff engaging with pupils in the mainstream context.

Staff need to read it in 30 seconds and know the need and the strategy.
Then we ask, 'Does it work?' and we change it if it doesn't. – *SENCO, secondary setting*

Some schools with specialist bases reported that when pupils with an LA-funded placement are in mainstream lessons, other pupils in the school (without a commissioned place) were able to make use of the specialist support and facilities. Pupils from the school's own intake might receive interventions in the specialist base or use it as a time out or regulation space, for example.

Staff deployment

The specialist bases in the schools that took part in the research were typically overseen by a designated lead teacher with expertise aligned to the focus or designation of the base, or the SENCO. The staff deployed in the specialist base and staffing ratios were shaped by the volume of pupils and level and type of need. In contrast to school-led provision, however, teaching within specialist bases across both primary and secondary settings was undertaken by qualified teachers, supported by TAs.

Staff were commonly anchored within specialist bases and it was rare for these staff to routinely work across mainstream, outside of the support they provided to pupils from the

specialist base. There was some evidence of mainstream staff being deployed within the specialist base to cover temporary staff shortages. Teachers and TAs were either appointed to work within the specialist base or redeployed from the mainstream workforce. All staff working within specialist bases typically had additional qualifications or professional backgrounds in a particular aspect of SEND. However, some schools prioritised experience and personal qualities over formal qualifications, particularly when recruiting TAs in SEMH contexts. This approach was also evidenced in previous research into the use of TAs across mainstream and special school contexts.³³

Teachers were most commonly deployed to deliver core curriculum subjects, particularly English and Maths. This approach was especially prevalent for pupils working significantly below age-related expectations. Teachers able to work across subjects, including some with primary backgrounds, were often prioritised within secondary specialist bases, reflecting the need to address gaps in literacy and numeracy among pupils transitioning from year 6 to 7.

TAs and HLTAs were frequently assigned defined areas of responsibility within the specialist base, most commonly linked to EHC plan requirements and their area of specialism (e.g., speech and language, physical and sensory support). TAs were also deployed to lead specific intervention strands. In both primary and secondary schools, TAs often travelled with pupils to provide continuity of support during periods spent in mainstream classes. Flexibility was a core feature of TA deployment. Although most TAs had a class base, to maintain safe staffing ratios they were expected to work across multiple classes and groups. This was particularly pronounced in specialist bases within primary settings to ensure continuity of support. Floating TAs and TAs specifically timetabled to staff specialist bases or regulation spaces during lunchtime were also used strategically to provide sufficient support during both structured and unstructured times.

In the secondary phase, several schools had TAs linked to specific year groups who supported pupils through KS3 into KS4 to ensure continuity. For these TA roles, a stronger emphasis was placed on relationship building, regulation and co-ordination with pastoral teams. Some secondary school leaders also reported that TAs' responsibilities had expanded beyond traditional classroom-based support. In these contexts, TAs increasingly contributed to the annual review processes, pupil passport updates and liaison with families and external agencies.

The focus of the specialist base was a key determinant of staffing ratios across primary and secondary settings. Staffing ratios of 1:1 and even 2:1 were common within SEN units for pupils with high and complex needs, including those with medical or SEMH needs and at risk of exclusion due to behaviour issues. Staff to pupil ratios were also often higher in early years and during key transitions. In settings for other types of needs

³³ CFE Research (2024) [Use of teaching assistants in schools](#). Research report.

(e.g., communication or cognition and learning) ratios were typically lower, with 1 adult to every 3 to 6 pupils.

Deployment of wider roles and external professionals

Included within the aforementioned ratios, a range of other staff were also deployed within specialist bases. These included pastoral staff (e.g. counsellors) and TAs specially trained to attend to pupils with medical and personal care routines. Specialist teachers employed by the LA (e.g. teachers of the vision- or hearing-impaired) were also based within specialist bases and went into mainstream to support designated pupils.

In addition, clinical or therapeutic input and interventions were often provided by external professionals, such as speech and language therapists (SaLT), occupational therapists (OT) (and OT assistants), educational psychologists (EP) (and EP assistants) and play therapists. Although these roles were not part of the schools' core workforce model, they were regarded as integral to the effectiveness of specialist bases. Many schools reported access to external professionals was scarce and some bought in this support from school budgets to ensure pupils' needs could be met effectively.

Specialist base in a primary school

This primary school is in a highly deprived area with around 380 pupils on roll. Just under one-third are on the SEN register, including 40 with EHC plans. The school strongly believes in supporting all children in their local area, as well as their families. They have a whole school approach to inclusion and celebrate differences.

The school has high rates of speech and communication needs in its cohort. Those identified with the lowest needs are given some additional small group input from TAs; those with higher needs have direct input from a TA specially trained by a SaLT. Those with the highest need are referred to the NHS SaLT service.

In the mornings, there are 18 class-based TAs supporting pupils in mainstream lessons. They then deliver small group interventions in the afternoon. The school also has 3 specially trained SEND TAs who each provide additional support to pupils across 2 year groups.

The school also has an LA-funded specialist base with 19 places, focussed on speech, language and communication needs. This is led by a qualified teacher who holds additional qualifications in SaLT. A TA, who is trained by the local SaLT service, delivers interventions alongside 5 other TAs who work with pupils in this provision. Around half of pupils allocated a place spend the majority of their time in mainstream and come to the specialist base for specialist input or subjects they find challenging. The rest spend the majority of their time in the specialist base because they are unable to access the mainstream curriculum and environment. They receive intensive support in small groups and tailored learning.

The SENCO oversees both the mainstream support and the specialist base and manages all the mainstream TAs and the specialist base lead.

The school also has a care suite that supports a high number of pupils with physical and medical needs. This is staffed by 6 TAs specially trained in personal and medical care procedures, including toileting, medication administration and safe physical support. They are managed by the wellbeing lead who also oversees the school's nurture provision. The school shares a TA trained to deliver ELSA with another school in their federation.

Further details of this case study are provided in [Appendix 2](#) along with a case study of a specialist base in a [secondary school](#).

Key drivers

Many of the factors that influenced the development and implementation of mainstream only and school-led provision also shaped specialist bases. The research identified a number of specific drivers of this provision, however.

LA requirements

The structure and operation of specialist bases were driven by LA commissioning arrangements, funding levels and placement decisions which, in turn, determined pupil cohorts and drove workforce models. Unlike school-led provision, specialist bases rarely emerge, although LAs do commission provision within schools that have successfully delivered school-led provision and with staff that have the skills and expertise to support pupils with particular needs. Once in place, however, specialist bases could evolve significantly in response to changes in the need profile of pupils.

Systemic pressures

Leaders described establishing specialist bases as a pragmatic response to local systems pressures, including rising levels of SEND and complexity of need, shortages of specialist capacity and funding constraints. Establishing a separate unit also helped to overcome restrictions of existing physical infrastructure in some schools. Falling pupil numbers, resulting in reduced income and unused space, was a driver for some schools to explore the development of specialist bases.

Requirement for specialist teaching and intervention

All pupils allocated a place with a specialist base have an EHC plan with specified outcomes and typically have higher needs than those supported through mainstream only and some school-led provision. Amongst the schools interviewed, staffing in specialist bases was shaped by pupils' learning and development needs. Unlike most school-led provision, specialist bases were typically led by qualified teachers with SEND specialisms who also delivered the curriculum. Teachers were supported by trained TAs and pastoral staff, with additional input from external or specialist teachers where needed.

Schools receive additional funding for each LA-commissioned place within specialist bases. This funding is distinct from schools' SEN budgets and ring-fenced to deliver provision in line with LA service specifications. Specifications typically require a qualified teacher with SEND expertise to lead the provision, trained TAs to provide support and access to specialist input. Leaders reported that this predictable, designated funding enables them to employ the number of staff required with deeper SEND training and, where needed, experience across multiple key stages.

Schools also require sufficient staff to deliver to pupils in small groupings and maintain appropriate staff to pupil ratios. The need for flexibility in the workforce led many leaders to prioritise appointing teachers with experience that spans phases or a range of subject areas.

Challenges and considerations

Rising demand for specialist bases

Several schools across both primary and secondary phases indicated that their specialist base was operating above funded capacity (at the request of the LA) or was expected to be doing so in the near future because of growing demand. Schools reflected that once a specialist base becomes established, external pressure can grow to admit more pupils, including those whose profiles do not fully match the original designation. Furthermore, several schools perceived that hosting a specialist base attracts families that hope, once their child is on roll at the school, it will enhance the chances of them being placed in the specialist base. Although some schools were able to extend access to the specialist base to some of their own pupils who they felt would benefit from more specialist support, LA-commissioned places absorbed the full capacity in other contexts. Having a specialist base (or additional school-led provision) was perceived to make a school a “SEND magnet”, thus increasing the overall number of pupils with SEND on roll. This puts additional strain on staff and resources.

Funding and resourcing

As noted above, LAs typically set out staffing expectations for specialist bases within their commissioning agreements. These specify the required number of teachers and support staff, expected qualifications, and ratio of adults to pupils, reflecting the designated need type of the specialist base. These staffing models are funded through ringfenced place-based funding and are separate from the individual provision required under Section F of pupils’ EHC plans. Section F influences the delivery of personalised support within the specialist base but does not determine the core staffing ratios of the provision.

Despite receiving additional funding for pupils in a specialist base, the amount allocated was frequently described as insufficient to cover the true cost of staffing and specialist input required. Schools said that prescriptive Section F requirements limited flexibility and felt that staffing specialist bases could have implications for mainstream provision, either because recruitment for the specialist base draws staff from the mainstream pool, funding is diverted to cover specialist staffing, or staff are temporarily pulled from mainstream when cover is needed to meet the legal requirements of the specialist base.

Most specialist bases have dedicated staff and schools stressed the importance of protecting this workforce from being pulled into general cover or wider school duties.

Schools sought to prevent this by assigning separate leadership and timetabling teachers within the specialist base. Nevertheless, staffing models were often described as “fragile”. High staffing ratios were required to support pupils with severe SEMH needs, particularly those at risk of exclusion. In this context, multiple adults may need to be deployed to rotate support, manage risk and avoid burnout. These ratios were rarely stable and were described as resource-driven rather than planned. Absences were difficult to cover, and recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled staff was reported to be difficult. These challenges were exacerbated by rising levels of need, which were increasing pressure on existing teams.

Integration and inclusion

Specialist bases were often located in a purpose-built unit or an existing building that had been adapted for this use. The physical infrastructure in main school buildings can act as a barrier to integration and inclusion in mainstream provision, however. To enable pupils with a range of needs, including physical or sensory disabilities, to engage in mainstream and ensure safety, the accessibility of the whole site must be considered, including lifts, routes and toilet facilities.

Effectiveness

Despite the challenges, the majority of schools with an LA-funded specialist base rated their provision as ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ effective. The leaders of specialist bases consistently described their provision as effective because it enabled pupils to make tangible progress against the outcomes in their EHC plans while stabilising engagement and behaviour. The specialist, structured environment of a specialist base allowed staff to pitch learning at an appropriate developmental level so that pupils who had struggled to access mainstream lessons could begin to secure foundations in reading, writing and numeracy. Where schools used targeted programmes led by specialist teachers and HLTAs (for example, systematic literacy and numeracy interventions or Elklan-informed communication work), staff reported clearer movement in the specific skills named in Section F, with progress visible both in assessment data and in the quality of classroom participation. Leaders stressed that these gains were not solely academic: pupils’ communication, independence and self-regulation improved as routines became predictable, support from adults became more consistent, and sensory or pastoral support were embedded rather than improvised.

A second reason leaders judged their provision effective was the marked improvement in pupils’ readiness to learn. Many pupils arrived in the specialist base highly anxious or dysregulated, cycling between lesson refusal and crisis. Over time, access to regulation opportunities, sensory circuits, brief movement or soft start routines, and calm spaces staffed by familiar adults, reduced the frequency and intensity of escalations. As regulation improved, attendance and punctuality followed, particularly for pupils with school avoidance profiles, and the proportion of lesson time spent engaged in learning

increased. These changes were felt across the wider school. Several interviewees described noticeable reductions in suspensions and exclusions once the specialist base was fully established, attributing this to 2 factors: first, pupils with the highest and most complex needs had access to therapeutic or specialist input at the point of need; second, mainstream teachers were no longer asked to manage persistent dysregulation in large classes without the right tools or space.

Crucially, specialist bases were seen as a vehicle for meaningful inclusion. Rather than acting as a 'silo', they provided a stable place from which pupils could be reintroduced to mainstream teaching in a planned, "stepped" way. Schools used time in mainstream as a core indicator of success. Pupils commonly began by returning for practical or strengths-based subjects while continuing to receive specialist teaching for core learning; as confidence and competence grew, the mainstream component widened. Leaders were clear that this pattern was harder to achieve through purely school-led provision, which tended to be timetabled around gaps and reliant on variable TA availability.

Effectiveness was also judged in terms of the capacity a specialist base adds to the whole school. Because bases were staffed by qualified teachers with SEND expertise and trained support staff, they became a hub for good practice. Mainstream teachers could observe high quality adaptations, co-plan with specialists and access advice on regulation strategies. TAs, meanwhile, were developed beyond general classroom support roles into defined specialisms (for example, speech and language, ELSA, autism informed practice, or targeted literacy), which improved intervention quality and consistency. Leaders repeatedly contrasted this with the instability of school-led models, where support depends on who is free on the day. By comparison, the specialist base's predictable staffing and routines gave pupils a reliable experience, allowed staff to run sustained intervention cycles and reduced the "firefighting" that can dominate mainstream SEND.

Taken together, the model made it possible to:

- deliver the provision in pupils' EHC plans with fidelity
- improve engagement and regulation so learning can take place
- reduce suspensions and exclusions
- increase the amount of meaningful time pupils spend learning alongside their peers in mainstream.

Where provision was perceived to be less effective, this was typically attributed to system-level constraints, particularly complexity of need, funding and workforce capacity (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Pupils who spend the majority of their time in the specialist base (SEN unit) may risk becoming detached or isolated from their peers. To mitigate this risk, many schools put in

place measures to enable pupils to interact, not just in class time, but during PE, assemblies and events.

Several leaders stated explicitly that some pupils who were currently supported in a SEN unit would be better served in specialist settings, but that these placements were not available. Some schools operated their SEN units as a stand-alone provision in every sense, often due to concerns about risks to pupil safety or the need to deliver highly differentiated input. Although pupils were on the same site as their mainstream peers, there was little or no integration.

Most of them spend all day in the unit...they join for swimming and sporting activities...and assembly, if appropriate. – *SENCO, primary setting*

Decisions about limited integration were described as being based on pupils' individual needs, safety considerations, sensory profiles and the school's assessment of what was reasonably practicable.³⁴

Likewise, staff in the SEN unit were seen, and saw themselves, as separate from the mainstream, with each having little knowledge or understanding of what the other delivered.

I don't know the names of the TAs over there [in the SEN unit]... I wouldn't want to do it. I dread ever being asked to cover a shift over there. I just don't think I'd be able to do it. – *TA, primary setting*

This calls into question the inclusivity of this approach in some contexts.

Future plans

Schools anticipated that demand for specialist bases will continue to grow, both from local communities and LAs, but reported that without system-level changes and additional funding and resources it will not be possible for many schools to expand the scale and scope of their existing provision.

Model 4: Tiered support

A fourth model of provision that emerged through the research was a 'tiered approach' whereby schools delivered school-led provision alongside a specialist base, underpinned by QFT with targeted interventions.³⁵ This model emerged in one of two ways:

³⁴ Consistent with schools' duties under Section 35 of the Children and Families Act 2014.

³⁵ Approximately 10% of the schools consulted implemented this approach, but this may not be representative of schools overall.

- a specialist base was created to supplement existing mainstream only and school-led provision
- a specialist base existed and school-led provision was expanded to manage needs across the core intake

Irrespective of how it evolved, the key advantage of this approach identified by school leaders was that it enables them to utilise the space, resources and specialist expertise within a specialist base to benefit a wider group of pupils with SEND, not just those with an LA-commissioned place. As one interviewee indicated:

This gives us more options about where we can support young people –
SENCO, secondary setting

The characteristics of the different components of tiered support mirrored the characteristics of the individual models described above; specialist bases were located in distinct units or buildings and school-led provision was located in designated spaces. The characteristics of pupils accessing the different components of the tiered approach, and the length of time they spent in each, also reflected the individual models described above.

Staff deployment

In tiered models, staff were typically deployed across provision (specialist base, school-led provision and mainstream). This was in contrast to schools that have a specialist base but no tiered support, where staffing tended to be more bounded and fixed. Several schools reported their specialist base staff also:

- staffed regulation rooms, quiet/wellbeing spaces, or school-led provision
- supported pupils without an LA-funded placement for short periods
- could move between the specialist base and school-led provision in response to staffing needs on a particular day

Leaders explained that the tiered model required a flexible approach to staff deployment because pupils' needs frequently fluctuated – sometimes during the same day – and evolved over time. Cross-working delivered the flexibility for staff to move with a pupil, when required, for example into a regulation room for part of a lesson, or into a small, targeted group in the specialist base for re-teaching, and then back into a mainstream class when they were able.

Schools with specialist bases and tiered models consistently had the most extensive SEND structures, including assistant SENCOs, SEND support officers, inclusion managers and role-specific administrators.

Key drivers

Leaders described the tiered model as a practical response to current realities. They were providing places for LA pupils who needed specialist input and were providing additional support to meet the increasing needs of pupils with SEND in their own intake.

Schools that had an existing specialist base reflected that the unit itself had often been a key driver for the development of a tiered approach, as it had attracted more pupils with SEND to the school (either because they felt the school had additional or more specialist SEND provision, or that they stood a greater chance of securing a place in the specialist base). Creating or expanding school-led provision had enabled schools to manage the increasing demands this had placed on them more effectively.

Staff deployment within tiered support was reported to be driven by workforce issues and funding pressures. Schools reported that they found it difficult to recruit and retain staff with specialist skills and expertise and that there was insufficient budget to appoint dedicated teams. As a result, schools deployed staff with SEND specialisms to their specialist base and drew on their experience, along with input from external professionals, to help upskill the wider workforce.

Challenges and considerations

Offering a specialist base, school-led provision and mainstream support was reported to be resource intensive. The biggest trade off, particularly in relation to the expansion of school-led provision, was space. Many schools struggled to accommodate the different demands on rooms, and this sometimes resulted in school-led provision being located away from main buildings or in older parts of schools, which was sometimes inappropriate or ineffective. Scope for expanding existing infrastructure was limited in many schools. Additionally, leaders reported that implementing a tiered approach added significant operational and administrative burden, particularly in relation to timetabling and staff deployment.

Leaders in these settings drew a clear distinction between funding for the specialist base and the wider tiered system. They explained that the specialist base commissioned places were funded by the LA, normally through the combination of place-based funding and any top-up associated with pupils' EHC plans. However, schools understood this funding to cover only the statutory, specialist offer, that is, the teaching, staffing ratios, interventions and facilities required to meet the needs of the pupils with a commissioned place within the specialist base. It did not cover the significantly larger group of pupils who accessed the school's school-led provision, for example, pupils using hub passes, EBSA rooms, regulation rooms or short stay learning spaces, or pupils with EHC plans naming the mainstream school rather than the specialist base. Leaders emphasised that this school-led provision was not separately funded and had to be resourced from

schools' core budgets, even though they were supporting substantial numbers of pupils each day.

Several schools explained that because the tiered model supported many more pupils than those with an LA-funded place in the specialist base, the school-led provision was effectively "running at a loss". Leaders stressed that they continued to operate this provision despite the cost because it was essential for maintaining engagement in learning, preventing breakdowns in mainstream classes and sustaining positive outcomes for a wider cohort of pupils.

LA commissioning agreements set the core staffing model for each specialist base, while Section F requirements anchor staff primarily to this provision (once pupils are admitted, the personalised, legally binding provision in EHC plans requires frequent, specialist input that uses most of the specialist base team's time). This was reported to be a barrier to flexible deployment of staff, which is regarded as necessary within a tiered approach. Specialist base staff have the skills to support the needs of a wider group of pupils but the majority of their time had to be spent fulfilling the EHC plan requirements of pupils with an LA-funded placement within the specialist base.

It was common for schools with tiered support to be named in EHC plans because of the flexibility and range of specialist support available, including for pupils with SEND who were not awarded an LA-funded placement with the specialist base. As a result, schools were becoming the default option when other provisions were full or unavailable. Schools reported feeling under pressure to "absorb" more pupils, despite the strain this was putting on staff and resources, including the specialist base.

Effectiveness

Despite the operational challenges and funding constraints, most schools reported that the flexibility afforded by the tiered approach to deliver seamless, tailored and responsive support to a wide range of pupils with SEND (with or without an EHC plan or specialist base placement) was effective. It was seen to support outcomes for all pupils, including those without SEND, by minimising disruption to learning while supporting inclusion and by maximising opportunities for pupils of different abilities to interact for at least a proportion of the school day, whether in mainstream, school-led or LA-funded provision.

As with the individual models, schools pointed to the proportion of pupils who had been supported to re-integrate into mainstream as a measure of the success of the tiered approach, along with noticeably calmer classrooms, fewer instances of pupils being removed from lessons, more pupils coping consistently with the school day, and more pupils effectively managing regulation breaks and successfully returning to learning.

Future plans

Schools operating tiered models indicated that they planned further measures to strengthen and expand their middle tier – predominantly school-led provision. These included adding new learning pathways at KS3 and KS4 to support pupils who are unable to access the mainstream curriculum but who do not require a specialist placement. Secondary schools also planned to develop their workforce strategies as others have, such as operating discrete support bases led by primary trained teachers to support small groups of year 7 pupils working at KS1. Schools were also exploring ways to increase the flexibility of their approach to enable pupils to move between school-led provision more frequently as their needs change.

Tiered support in a secondary school

This secondary school in the East Midlands has around 900 pupils with 15% on the SEN register and 80 with EHC plans. It is a rural school, rated good by Ofsted and has lower than the national average rate of pupils eligible for FSM.

The school believes that pupils should spend as much time as possible in mainstream classes with their peers being taught by qualified subject-specific teachers. However, they also understand that some pupils with SEND require additional support when they are not able to access learning in a busy classroom environment.

This school has an LA-funded RP for pupils with autism which has 30 places. These pupils spend as much time in mainstream lessons as possible and use the RP as a place to regulate, study and participate in additional interventions to support their needs. This space is staffed by 2 teachers with specialisms in autism and 4 TAs, who may also support pupils when in mainstream lessons. The 2 RP teachers lead targeted small-group and 1:1 teaching and therapeutic/regulation work (including EBSA re-entry), co-ordinate multi-agency input (e.g. from EPs), and oversee bespoke in-class TA deployment and whole school adaptations (e.g. movement breaks, sensory/environmental changes).

There is also an LA-funded SEN unit (which the school refers to as a nurture unit) with 10 places for pupils with cognition and learning needs. These pupils spend all of their time in the unit and follow a bespoke curriculum delivered by a lead teacher and 3 specialist teachers, with support from 3 TAs. These pupils generally work towards entry level and vocational qualifications.

In addition, the school has set up a support base for those who are at risk of exclusion. This is co-managed at senior level by the assistant head (pastoral & behaviour) and the assistant head/SENCO. Day-to-day operation is led by a lead (qualified) teacher with a TA coach/assistant lead. This is staffed by a manager and a TA with expertise in pupil behaviour. Pupils on this pathway do more vocational and community learning.

Further details on this case study are provided in [Appendix 2](#) along with a case study

Variations between models

Overall choice of approach was driven by profile of pupil need, capacity, resources, as well as a school's judgement of how best to meet pupils' needs and be an inclusive setting. Table 2 sets out the key variations in the delivery of each model. The findings for school-led provision (support bases) and LA-funded specialist bases apply to the tiered model. The only distinct feature of the tiered model is there is greater fluidity to staffing and other arrangements.

Table 3: Key variations in approach and staff deployment by model

-	Mainstream only	Support base: school-led support	Specialist base: LA-funded SEN units and RP
Leadership	• SLT and SENCO	• Distributed: SLT (assistant head), SENCO, heads of year, provision managers	• SLT lead, SENCO, specialist base lead
SENCO role	• Often has teaching load • Co-ordinates teachers, TAs and interventions • Checks delivery	• (Sometimes) reduced teaching load • Oversees/delivers SEND and mainstream provision • SEND administration support role	• Oversees specialist base lead and mainstream provision (often with deputy SENCO)
Delivery and responsibility	• Adaptive whole class teaching • Led by teacher with TA support	• Some small group teaching and/or 1:1 Timetabled spaces: • Adaptive whole class teaching with specialist input and/or support • Led by teacher, delivered by TA. Intensive support:	• Some small group teaching and/or 1:1 • Specialist input and support, including alternative curriculum • Led by specialist teacher, delivered by

-	Mainstream only	Support base: school-led support	Specialist base: LA-funded SEN units and RP
		- Alternative learning/curriculum - Delivered by teacher with specialist TA support	teachers and specialist TAs
Use of space	In class, work stations, corridors/spare spaces	Repurposed class or office	Clearly identifiable, often purpose-built space with facilities
TA deployment	- In class - Interventions around learning	- In class and in provision - Timetabled interventions - Lunch, breaks and breakfast cover (where required to support pupils during unstructured time)	- In specialist base - In class tailored support - Specialist interventions - Additional adult - Lunch, breaks, and breakfast cover
CPD and training	Whole school adaptive teaching and SEND support strategies	Whole school adaptive, SEND support strategies, specific interventions, mentoring and modelling	Specialised (area of need), role-specific, external input, adaptations, handling and small step assessments

4 Systemic barriers

The research identified a series of systemic issues which could act as barriers to effective and inclusive SEND provision. This chapter explores these issues, with a particular focus on the implications for school workforce models and staff deployment.

Complexity of need

There was a consensus among the schools in the sample that the number of pupils with SEND has increased over recent years and that the variety and level of need were significantly higher than in the past. This is reflected in official statistics that demonstrate the overall proportion of pupils with SEND has risen over 10 years and stood at 19.6% in 2025, up from 18.8% in 2024. Around one-third of pupils with an EHC plan are identified with a primary need of ASD (33.6%) and 1-in-5 as having SLCN (20.7%). These increases, while not uniform across all schools, contribute to the perception of increased need, even where the absolute numbers remain relatively small in many schools.³⁶

Against this backdrop, leaders described an increasing number of children entering primary school unable to walk or toilet themselves and with issues associated with socialisation, routine and behaviour (which may or may not reflect a SEND need). Schools also reported a growing proportion of non-verbal pupils (one primary school reported that they had 5 non-verbal pupils in the same year group) and pupils working several years below age expectations. Furthermore, the proportion of pupils with no or limited English, experience of care, trauma and/or socio-economic deprivation is reported to be increasing with each new intake in some schools. While these factors are not classified as SEND, they often intersect and are reported by schools to be adding to the complexity of support provision.

In the view of leaders, SENCOs and experts, pupils with the highest levels of SEND require specialist provision to achieve their full potential because mainstream schools are not equipped to meet their needs effectively. Attempting to do so was reported to be putting significant strain on staffing and school budgets, was setting pupils with SEND up to fail and, in some instances, impacting on outcomes for other pupils.

We have a pupil who is really struggling and I have 2 adults with him. Mum has requested a special placement, but we can't find anywhere in [county]. There are no special school spaces, so he's staying with us, but it's not right for him. We don't have the facilities; the things he needs to help him like a sensory room. We have had top-up funding from the LA but it doesn't really go anywhere near to paying for a member of staff. –
SENCO, primary setting

³⁶ DfE 2024 to 2025. Explore Education Statistics: [Special educational needs in England](#).

School leaders were faced with the challenge of how to best deliver educational provision for children attending their mainstream setting who cannot be fully supported within the mainstream environment or curriculum and require intensive adult support. This was directly impacting on the ways staff were deployed and how spaces were allocated within schools. One primary SENCO explained that they had converted offices, cupboards and even a kitchen to create spaces for pupils with complex needs, to keep these and other pupils safe. Accommodating more complex needs was also reported to be influencing decisions about training and development, recruitment and the allocation of resources to other aspects of provision (e.g. enrichment activities) which, in some cases, had resulted in trade-offs to prevent (or in most cases minimise) a budget deficit.

There was also evidence that some schools were shouldering more of the burden of responsibility for pupils with more complex needs than others, particularly in areas where specialist placements were especially scarce. Typically, these were schools with well-developed SEND provision and a reputation for effective support.

We are recognised as providing an absolutely excellent service to SEND pupils and word gets around. It's great that we do well, but it's not great that more parents then name our school for their child and we're left thinking 'how on earth are we going to manage this?' when we know the money won't be enough to cover the need. So, we end up going more in debt. – *Leader, primary setting.*

Funding

SEND provision is funded from school budgets, with additional resources allocated through top-up funding associated with the EHC plans and LA-commissioned places within specialist bases. This funding is provided to meet additional costs incurred by schools associated with meeting Section F requirements stipulated in pupils' EHC plans, which can include 1:1 support for some or all of the school day (including break and lunch times), in addition to therapies and specialist equipment. Schools consistently reported that the additional funding received from LAs was insufficient to meet the full cost of the support required, however.

Some of the EHC plans will stipulate that it has to be an experienced TA ... so I have to pay them more, but I won't get more funding. – *SENCO, secondary setting*

In this context, some schools reported making strategic decisions about how many pupils with high levels of need they could admit through their general admissions process, particularly where those pupils did not have an EHC plan which was associated with additional funding. These decisions did not relate to refusing pupils whose EHC plan named the school, which schools accepted in line with statutory duties. Instead, leaders

were referring to managing the intake of pupils whose needs would place additional pressure on school-led provision.

Staff represent a substantial cost for schools; one leader reported spending 93% of their school budget on staffing. Funding constraints were, therefore, a significant consideration in recruitment strategies:

We've got a huge deficit in our budget this year... We were hoping to employ an additional LSA because of growing need within the school, but the decision was made last week not to. We just don't have the money. – *SENCO, primary setting.*

This underpinned almost every decision regarding staff deployment in each of the schools. It had a tangible impact on how support for pupils with SEND was delivered, including the extent to which schools were able to implement recognised good practice³⁷ and meet all the requirements in EHC plans. The research highlighted that some schools were sometimes unable to meet needs in the ways stipulated in EHC plans because of lack of staff capacity. Instead, schools developed alternative solutions to achieving outcomes, including, for example, providing support to pupils with the same types or levels of need in small groups rather than 1:1.

Funding constraints at a school level were being exacerbated by reductions in LAs' budgets, some of which were also running deficits. The implications of these budget cuts included delays to EHC plan assessments, a reduction in the number of approved plans, limits on the number of therapist sessions and access to specialist support staff (see next section). In one area, the LA had pooled the funding for SEND and invited schools to bid, with conditions attached:

You can only bid for the [SEND] money [from the LA] if you are saying your provision is going to have a wider impact. You need to come with an idea that you've costed and obviously you're head-to-head with other schools. You need to say that your need is more than another school's, or that is something you can collectively purchase to the benefit of all the schools. – *SENCO, primary setting.*

Collectively, respondents frequently described the system for funding SEND provision as “broken”, “unsustainable”, “inadequate” and “unfair”. As a result, all pupils – with and without SEND – were missing out. School leaders acknowledged that delivering provision within a mainstream context is expensive but believed funding it appropriately would be ultimately cheaper than placing more pupils in specialist settings following tribunal.

³⁷ EEF (2020) [Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools](#). Guidance Report.

Access to external professionals and support

Schools reported that the reduction in LA funding and wider workforce shortages³⁸ for specialist teachers, EP, CAMHS, OT, physiotherapy and SaLT meant that accessing these services was becoming increasingly challenging. Interviewees reported that, in their experience, thresholds had been raised, so only pupils with the highest and most severe needs have access to funding, and there were often lengthy delays for assessments and input. High turnover within specialisms further limited capacity and resulted in the loss of knowledge and understanding about school contexts, including the profile of pupil need and SEND provision. Schools reported that reduced access to these services was negatively impacting their ability to support pupils with SEND and exacerbated funding and resourcing challenges.³⁹ Schools reported meeting the cost of specialist services, where they were available, privately from core budgets and that staff time had been absorbed undertaking assessments with remote support from specialists, which otherwise would have been completed by specialists themselves, in person.

The shortage of specialists was also a key driver of school workforce strategies and staff deployment, as they sought to appoint support staff with specialist skills and to upskill existing staff to deliver specialist inputs (see next section on [capacity building](#)). The research highlighted numerous examples of TAs or HLTAs being deployed to deliver programmes that would otherwise have been delivered by external professionals, which reduced capacity elsewhere. Even with training, some staff reported feeling ill-equipped to take on these additional responsibilities and questioned whether they were meeting pupils needs effectively. Leaders reported that staff had become demoralised and left because of the increased expectations of their role and the lack of recognition in terms of salary and professional status. It was also felt by leaders, SENCOs and experts that failing to fully meet the needs of pupils with SEND in mainstream settings by providing specialist support could be contributing to a rise in the level of challenging behaviour in schools, which was also impacting staff wellbeing and retention.

Capacity within the school workforce

Given the shortage of direct input from specialists, increased demand for SEND provision across all models, and the high rate of attrition within some staff roles, including TAs and SENCOs, schools were often seeking to appoint staff with a range of skills and

³⁸ Kessler, I., and Boaz, A. (2024). [The Demand and Supply of Therapists for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: A Scoping Study](#).

³⁹ Leaders noted that although notional SEND funding is intended to meet needs prior to an EHC plan being issued, in practice the support required by some pupils far exceeds this allocation, particularly given long waits for assessment and limited access to LA specialist services. As a result, schools described covering significant costs from core budgets for extended periods, including paying privately for specialist input and reallocating staff time to carry out interventions themselves.

experience in SEND and/or to develop the capacity of their existing staff. Recruitment and training do, however, present challenges, as outlined below.

Recruitment

Leaders described how the quality of the support provided to pupils with SEND was determined by their ability to recruit and subsequently retain staff with the appropriate skills and experience. Most had experienced challenges with recruitment (and retention, as noted above). Difficulties recruiting skilled TAs, especially those with the experience and confidence to work with children with high SEMH needs, communication and sensory needs or complex behaviours, were widespread. It was not uncommon for schools to receive a poor response to vacancies and for the calibre of applicants to fall short of leaders' expectations. For example, one school received just one applicant for a TA post and the candidate was not appointable because of their lack of skills and experience. Pay, terms and conditions were identified as a barrier to attracting suitably qualified TAs.

A further barrier to the recruitment (and retention) of teaching staff was the lack of focus on SEND in ITT. Leaders reported that newly qualified teachers often entered the workforce without a foundational understanding of the types of SEND they are likely to encounter in today's mainstream classrooms or the practical strategies required to support pupils. In their view, this increases pressure on teachers in the early stages of their career, increases the demands on schools during induction, and can contribute to early career attrition. As a result, some leaders reported that they tended to rely more on experienced teachers, who already have a repertoire of adaptive practice, because they were better equipped to manage increasingly complex pupil needs while maintaining classroom stability.

My teacher training did not remotely prepare me for what I've done in my career with pupils with SEND. If all teachers are expected to be teachers of SEND, they aren't going to cut the mustard because most people have been trained to teach higher level subject knowledge to neurotypical children. The training deficit is phenomenal. – *Leader, secondary setting.*

Leaders explained that workforce management practices were especially important, and more frequently required, when schools experienced recruitment challenges. When schools were unable to appoint, the existing workforce had to absorb a greater volume and complexity of need, which increased the risk of stress and burnout. Leaders had to deploy existing staff based on capacity rather than capability and rotate staff frequently to protect their wellbeing. Weekly supervision, debriefing sessions, and deployment of members of SLT to relieve pressure on classroom staff were also put in place to support staff and mitigate the risk of attrition.

Increasingly, schools were drawing on external professionals to design or quality-assure programmes and upskill school staff to deliver them, in part as a mitigation for reduced

direct input from professionals with pupils. In several settings, SaLTs and EPs were used to train and supervise school staff, enabling TAs or other support staff to deliver interventions between visits. External professionals were also invited to observe practice and provide feedback to assure quality.

Upskilling staff in a small secondary school

This small mainstream secondary has around 800 pupils on roll and a proportion of pupils with SEND above the national average. The school is recognised locally for its SEND provision, particularly for pupils with autism. It operates a tiered approach to meet the full range of needs, with targeted interventions and specialist units.

The school is focused on classroom practice improvements and relational strategies, supported by in-house CPD and occasional external training. Staff training includes practical classroom approaches, trauma-informed strategies, dyslexia-friendly practices and departmental CPD linked to QFT. In-house CPD is delivered throughout the year via whole school sessions, department-level training, SENCO-led briefings, staff bulletins and supervision for emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs), including meetings with line managers, safeguarding supervision and case discussions, in addition to the EP-led supervision required for ELSA accreditation.

Recent training from the LA's Educational Psychology Services on relational schools, which included ongoing educational psychology supervision over the year, was delivered to a range of staff, including the SENCO, heads of year, behaviour leads and support staff. As a result of the training, the school is rewriting its behaviour policy with whole-staff training to follow.

The SENCO describes the relational schools training as some of the “best CPD they have received”, as it has supported a shift from consequence-based to relationship-centred regulation, that enables staff to better understand and respond to pupils' needs.

The school is also supported by a wide range of EHC plan-driven, LA-funded specialist services, focused on cognition and learning, communication and interaction, as well as provision for hearing impaired pupils. These external specialists offer direct training for TAs, resources and toolkits for all staff as well as termly supervision.

[Thematic Case Study 4](#) in Appendix 3 provides a further example of how a large, split-site secondary school upskills its staff.

The role of the SENCO

Across all models, schools consistently described the volume and intensity of work for the SENCO as “overwhelming”. In some contexts, the responsibilities were split across multiple staff. One school, for example, appointed a SENCO administrator specifically to manage exam access arrangements because the SENCO “was drowning in it”. These

additional support roles, whether Deputy SENCOs, SEND administrators or specialist support officers, were widely viewed as essential to allow SENCOs to maintain a strategic focus amid rising levels of need and administrative burden.

Many schools reported that they had one or more members of teaching staff who had, or who were working towards, SENCO qualifications. These staff often take on the role of deputy SENCO (some informally), an arrangement that school leaders reported also supports succession planning and mitigates the risk of attrition among SENCOs.

Accountability and performance frameworks

One of the biggest tensions identified by schools was between inclusion and accountability. Although schools were focused on supporting all pupils to achieve as part of an inclusive approach, leaders and SENCOs highlighted the increasing number of pupils with complex needs for whom the mainstream curriculum, and the associated measures, were inappropriate.

Our biggest barrier is high-stakes accountability. You cannot be a truly inclusive school and expect our Year 6 [national curriculum test] results to be comparable to a school that does not have anywhere near the issues we have with SEND. It's not about whether they [pupils with SEND] reach national expectations. It's about what we're able to do with them, what we're able to achieve with them and the progress they make from their starting points – *Leader, primary setting*

I'm a [union] rep and headteachers' concerns are that if they don't get their [national curriculum test] results up then they will lose their jobs, because Ofsted will come in, they'll put them into 'requires improvement', or they'll make them 'inadequate'. ⁴⁰ Some of them would love to be more inclusive, but they are scared for their livelihoods. I would happily sit with anybody and discuss the progress of any of our SEN children. But, if that person arrived at our door with the automatic assumption that because our [national curriculum test] results say X, Y and Z, we have failed those children, then that's an incredibly disheartening place to be working from. – *Leader, primary setting*

Schools are judged against a series of performance measures, including rates of attendance, national curriculum test scores in primary schools and GCSE attainment in

⁴⁰Since the interviews were completed the Ofsted framework has been revised. In the future, inclusion will be graded on a 5-point scale (from "Exceptional" to "Urgent Improvement") based on how effectively a school identifies pupils' needs, adapts teaching and the curriculum, delivers and evaluates additional support, fosters an inclusive culture, and secures meaningful progress for all learners: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-use-from-november-2025>

secondary schools. Progress 8 is a national performance measure of academic progress from the end of primary school (KS2) to the end of secondary school (KS4). However, because Progress 8 is calculated based on performance in a limited set of academic subjects at GCSE level, schools reflected that it does not fully reflect the progress made by many pupils with significant SEND. Pupils following personalised or alternative pathways, or working well below age-related expectations, would often make meaningful gains academically (although achievement is often below GCSE or equivalent level) and in terms of their self-efficacy (e.g. communication, emotional regulation or independence). Although these represent positive outcomes for pupils and help to support successful transitions to the next phase of education or training, they are not reflected in Progress 8. As a result, many leaders felt that the current system can undervalue the work schools do to support pupils with complex needs.

Current accountability measures were perceived to act as a perverse incentive for schools to limit the number of pupils with SEND and those with higher needs who are difficult to place, thus reducing capacity across the system. This issue also impacted decisions about where to prioritise resources. In interview, some leaders suggested their decisions around staff deployment to support pupils with SEND were being underpinned by concerns about how being inclusive would affect their overall school performance. There is a perceived tension between allocating staff to support pupils with SEND to achieve positive outcomes for them versus allocating staff to support the broader cohort of pupils to achieve high academic outcomes.

To alleviate the tension and enable them to better balance the needs of all pupils in support of positive outcomes, leaders, particularly those in the secondary phase, would like to see alternative measures of accountability for pupils with SEND to be introduced, such as vocational qualifications achieved, work experience placements filled, progression to post-16 learning and positive wellbeing.

Implications for inclusion

The evidence revealed that almost every systemic challenge that schools experienced had implications for staffing, including the number of staff required, the range of skills needed, and how staff were deployed to meet pupil needs. The ways in which these systemic barriers affected leaders' decision-making and staff deployment had implications for the implementation of inclusive mainstream practice and the sustainability of their approach. The following summarises some of the key challenges faced by schools in respect to inclusion

- While the ambition for all children to attend their local mainstream school was widely supported, systems and resources fell short of meeting the increasingly diverse and complex needs of pupils with SEND.

- While schools supported the idea that every child should have the opportunity to attend their local school, there is a risk that pupils with SEND become ‘co-located’ rather than fully ‘included’ within school communities when their needs cannot be met effectively within mainstream provision.
- Schools have high aspirations for all pupils, but do not want to set pupils up to fail. Pupils with SEND often need more support to access learning and some need highly specialised input, including from external professionals, with a focus on personal as well as academic development. Some schools felt this came at the expense of pupils without SEND.
- The mainstream setting cannot provide the environment and expert support for a minority of pupils’ needs and attempting to do so can sometimes put the safety of them and other pupils at risk.
- Delivering inclusion has resulted in the expansion of the roles and responsibilities of teaching and support staff, particularly TAs, which has not been reflected in ITT for teachers, job descriptions, and the salary and professional status of TAs. This contributed to recruitment and retention challenges.
- Some experts and school leaders suggested that not every school has an inclusive ethos and, as a result, some schools support a disproportionate number of pupils with SEND. This puts a strain on staff and resources.
- Accountability frameworks were felt to work against the development of inclusive whole school approaches to SEND and to present a risk to SEND capacity when schools prioritise performance against these measures over inclusion.
- Trade-offs by schools can impact on the quality of provision overall and outcomes achieved by pupils with and without SEND.

5 Conclusion

The research suggested that inclusion in mainstream settings was shaped by the decisions that school leaders made about how staff were organised and deployed in combination with a range of other factors such as ethos, space and teaching practice. Workforce deployment rarely remained static but constantly evolved in response to the arrival of new pupils, the approval of new EHC plans and Section F requirements and unplanned staff absences. Leaders continuously made decisions about where staff work, with whom and what they do, and adjusted staffing in real time in response to changes in pupil needs. Despite the pressure this created, schools showed creativity and commitment: they moved staff at short notice, reshaped timetables, monitored group sizes and made the best use of every space they had available – sometimes repurposing rooms several times a day – so that pupils with SEND could succeed alongside their peers. To keep doing this well, schools reported that they need the right physical spaces, the right people (in terms of staffing), and the right specialist support.

According to the school leaders interviewed, as levels of need in mainstream settings have grown, so too has the number of people involved in supporting pupils with SEND. Schools often drew on several teams, including those with responsibility for pastoral and behaviour as well as SEND support, in addition to teaching staff and external specialists. Leaders were clear that co-ordinating these teams has become one of the most demanding parts of running an inclusive mainstream school. It requires effective communication and an understanding across all staff of pupils' needs and the strategies that help them learn and progress.

How different staff roles are deployed to support inclusion

Teachers

Classroom teachers remained at the heart of this system. They planned the curriculum, adapted lessons, set expectations and assessed pupils' progress. Pupils with SEND who spend time both in mainstream classes and a support or specialist base relied on teachers to make sure small group work undertaken in the base connected with and reflected what was being taught in the main lesson. Teachers also made many of the daily decisions that shaped and supported inclusion, such as noticing when a pupil is beginning to struggle, making judgements about appropriate adjustments or adaptations to teaching and implementing a low arousal approach to prevent a situation from arising. Given the scale of SEMH needs in some settings, interviewees reflected that teachers needed to understand what dysregulation looks like and how to keep a pupil connected to learning without escalating the situation, in addition to curriculum adaptation. In the most effective systems, teachers remained central even when pupils learn outside the classroom.

TAs

Working closely with teachers are TAs, HLTAs and LSAs whose roles now focus on delivering much of the day-to-day support for pupils with SEND. In many mainstream only settings and in some school-led support bases, TAs worked relatively autonomously and were responsible for delivering interventions. In specialist bases, however, provision was generally delivered by teachers with support from TAs.

TAs and HLTAs ensured that small group work in a base mirrored the language and sequence of main lessons to facilitate smooth reintegration. Their roles included in-class prompting, small group intervention, supporting pupils during transitions, and providing short periods of regulation outside lessons. Many had specialist training (for example, in communication, literacy or emotional literacy), and others adopted highly skilled approaches such as the “coach, don’t do” model⁴¹ to build independence. Many TAs and HLTAs held accredited training (for example, Elklan, ELSA, precision teaching) and delivered short, targeted interventions. In some secondary schools, TAs worked with pupils across key stages as year-linked key workers, in others as subject-aligned support. Other schools had roaming models whereby a single TA checks in with several pupils across multiple classrooms, and some deployed TAs specifically because of their specialisms.

Across both phases, most schools had deliberately moved away from the ‘Velcro’ model, whereby the same member of staff supports a pupil on a 1:1 basis each day, towards more flexible deployment whereby staff rotated and supported different pupils. However, there were differences in TA deployment by phase. In primary schools, deployment was typically shaped by the need for close supervision, personal care, early communication support and safety. Leaders often described assigning several adults flexibility within early years or year 1 to meet increasingly diverse and high levels of need, including toileting, feeding, behaviour regulation or communication programmes.

In secondary schools, deployment was shaped by subject timetabling and the need for specialist knowledge. Some secondaries embedded subject-aligned support (for example, graduates working as academic support assistants in maths or English or other subjects aligned to their degree). Others described difficulties in ensuring TAs were in “the right lessons” to meet the needs of pupils with EHC plans, while still supporting pupils across the broader SEN register. There was a wide variety of subject-based deployment, floating roles and mentor roles, all designed to ensure access to curriculum while managing the complexity of other pupils’ needs.

Access to external specialists (SaLT, OT, EP, mental health practitioners) was often limited. In practice, schools asked trained HLTAs and TAs to deliver specialist designed

⁴¹ Grounded in the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)’s guidance on the effective use of TAs: [Deployment of teaching assistants](#).

programmes between professional visits. This kept support moving but also reshaped TA roles and affected deployment day to day. Where trusts, LAs and NHS teams partnered closely with schools, there was better access to specialist support, training and even multi-disciplinary case discussions.

Because their roles were so varied and responsive, leaders reported that TAs and HLTAs needed to work with teachers (and SENCO and pastoral teams where appropriate) so they can make informed decisions throughout the day.

Pastoral staff

Across both phases, leaders explained that pastoral teams now played a central role in inclusion alongside teams with responsibility for SEND because they responded to a wide range of needs that affected pupils' ability to engage in learning. These teams supported pupils who required help with emotional regulation, anxiety, relationships and attendance along with wider barriers to wellbeing. Interviewees reflected that these needs now shaped workforce deployment as much as cognition and learning needs. Many pupils needed short, planned breaks from busy classrooms, predictable routines and staff trained in low arousal approaches so pupils can regulate and return to learning quickly. SEMH interventions, calm breaks, soft starts and regulation routines were managed and delivered by teams comprising behaviour leads, attendance officers, counsellors, mentors, nurture staff and/or family support workers.

A key part of a pastoral team's role was liaising with families and co-ordinating with external services and they were often the first to respond when a pupil was beginning to struggle. Pastoral teams played a pivotal role in keeping pupils in mainstream lessons and preventing repeated incidents that could otherwise lead to exclusion or long-term disengagement. Indeed, a 'relational approach' was gaining traction and schools reported that they use a range of staff to act as 'key workers', offering personalised support and guidance on a regular basis to pupils with SEND. This became particularly popular in schools that have moved away from a 'Velcro' model whereby a TA was assigned to work with a pupil on a 1:1 basis.

Pastoral teams often supported teachers by helping them to understand and recognise dysregulation and how to adjust their teaching in the moment.

SEND leadership and management

Across the sample, SEND teams, led by SENCOs and increasingly, but not always, supported by deputy SENCOs, SEND administrators and specialist teachers or HLTAs, were responsible for identification, assessment, intervention planning, advice on curriculum adaptation and statutory processes.

The SEND leadership team co-ordinated paperwork, reintegration plans, ensure consistency between teachers and support staff, and helped manage the movement of pupils between mainstream lessons, support bases and specialist bases. They also provided much of the training and coaching that allowed teachers and TAs to feel confident and ensured that adaptations were consistent and matched to need. As the volume and complexity of need rose, the SEND team's role expanded, and SENCOs often described the challenge of maintaining strategic oversight of SEND support while also addressing day-to-day operational issues.

Alongside SEND teams, several large secondary schools had inclusion leaders or inclusion managers who focused on the whole school picture. In MATs, trust-level inclusion leads often supported these efforts by aligning processes and encouraging the sharing of teachers with a SEND specialism, intervention resources, best practice and training. This cross-school work helped reduce duplication and reduced the financial burden on individual schools.

Pulling all these teams together required significant co-ordination. Information must be shared quickly; staff need to be able to step in for each other and decisions about deployment often need to be made within minutes when a pupil becomes distressed or a class experiences a sudden change in dynamic. Leaders spoke openly about the complexity of this task. But they also emphasised how much can be achieved when these teams work in unison.

Models of provision

A school's approach was largely determined by the needs of pupils, the physical space available, staff resources and funding constraints.

Mainstream only

Across the schools operating a mainstream only approach, leaders described a number of common features that underpinned effective inclusion, these included: teachers leading the planning and assessment for all pupils, with TAs and HLTAs giving structured prompts in class and delivering pre- or post-teaching to keep pupils on track; regular CPD focused on scaffolding, vocabulary instruction and modelling to equip teaching staff to deliver adaptive teaching practice; and visible SENCOs who model strategies, quality-assure adaptations and ensure the smooth flow of information between teachers, TAs and pastoral teams. Leaders emphasised that well-established routines, calm and organised classrooms, and staff with the confidence to manage dysregulation created the conditions for pupils with SEND to learn successfully alongside their peers.

Within the sample of schools, TAs were deployed in ways that reinforced high-quality, teacher-led classroom practice and were skilled in delivering short, targeted interventions. TAs were perceived to be most effective when they provided targeted scaffolding to enable pupils to complete tasks, rather than completing tasks on behalf of pupils. Briefings between teachers and TAs before and after lessons were reported to ensure adaptations were coherent and purposeful. TAs were deployed flexibly rather than attached to individual pupils, moving between pupils or classes in response to need and to avoid dependency. Many TAs had developed specialist skills. Leaders also described TAs as active members of the wider inclusion system: they contributed to early identification, attended SEND briefings, and fed into reviews of pupils' support.

Leaders reported that a mainstream only model based on adaptive teaching, short interventions and TA support was "sufficient to respond to the needs of pupils" when the level of need was relatively low. Leaders noted that rising complexity of need made the mainstream only model increasingly difficult to sustain, because of limitations in staffing and space.

Schools monitored the volume and complexity of need closely because a small rise in needs or numbers can quickly stretch in class support and impact pupil outcomes.

It should be emphasised that very few secondary schools that took part in the research operated a mainstream only model. Leaders reported that fixed timetables, higher levels of SEMH need and EBSA and subject-specific curriculum demands made it difficult to sustain an exclusively in-class approach. As a result of these factors, there was also less flexibility to integrate short interventions or provide in-class regulation support in secondary schools, compared with primary settings

Secondary schools were far more likely to deliver a school-led support base or tiered support that also incorporates a specialist base.

Support base

To support pupils who struggle with a full day in busy classrooms, some schools put in place school-led support bases. This provision was usually led day-to-day by HLTAs, TAs or inclusion staff with oversight from the SENCO. Mainstream class teachers planned the curriculum and lesson structure (but did not tend to deliver the majority of lessons) and in some secondary schools, primary-trained teachers lead nurture provision for year 7 and 8 pupils to build foundational literacy and numeracy before pupils rejoined full mainstream timetables.

Pupils tended to spend part of their timetable in the support base for small group teaching, targeted intervention and short regulation breaks, then return to lessons. Staff often worked across the base and mainstream to ensure continuity for pupils. Leaders reported that this can be very effective, especially when group sizes remain small and

staffing is stable. When numbers rose or needs intensified, staffing changed quickly to reflect this.

Specialist base

For pupils with higher or more complex needs, some schools had LA-commissioned specialist bases (SEN units/RP). In these Bases, all pupils had EHC plans. The provision was led by teachers with SEND specialisms supported by trained TAs and external professionals. In the view of interviewees, specialist bases work best when pupils with similar needs are grouped together, the environment is predictable and staff apply specialist approaches. The balance of time pupils spent in the base and mainstream was reviewed frequently so that mainstream time could be increased when pupils are ready. These Bases often became a practice hub for the whole school: mainstream staff observed high-quality adaptations and brought routines back to their classes. Because LAs determine staffing, specialist staff time was generally anchored to the base. While this ensured Section F requirements are delivered, it could limit the amount of flexibility in staffing that was available to the wider, mainstream offer.

Tiered support

Many schools that participated in the research implemented a tiered approach, where mainstream lessons sat alongside school-led support bases and LA-funded specialist bases. The main driver for having a support base was the need to provide targeted support outside the mainstream setting for pupils who do not meet the LA threshold for a space in the specialist base.

This created some clear advantages. The presence of a specialist base meant there were teachers and TAs with deeper SEND expertise on site. Although these staff were anchored to the specialist base, they could provide advice to mainstream colleagues, and their understanding of pupil needs could help shape more effective practice across the school. In some cases, support bases borrowed ideas or routines from specialist bases, for example, creating a low arousal room layout, using structured visual timetables, or adopting the short ‘teach–regulate–return’ cycles specialist staff use successfully.

Delivering tiered support also placed significant strain on schools. Leaders described the model as effective but highly resource intensive. Each system had its own staffing needs, space requirements and daily routines. Schools had to make sure that movement between these spaces was safe, purposeful and well-timed, to ensure learning was not lost and pupils did not miss out on support. Co-ordinating this typically fell to inclusion managers, SENCOs, pastoral teams and administrative staff. In several schools, this meant weekly or even daily adjustments to ensure the right staff were in the right place.

The support base is not additionally funded, yet it often supported far more pupils than a specialist base. This is why some leaders described support bases as “running at a loss”:

Leaders repeatedly explained that they had to pull TAs, HLTAs and LSAs from mainstream lessons to staff the support base. As a result, mainstream classes may have fewer staff available, even though pupils in these classes may benefit from this support.

Although it brings expertise into the school, the staffing model in a specialist base was set by the LA, so staff numbers were fixed. When needs increased or when pupils' profiles broadened beyond the original designation, the specialist base could not absorb more pupils or meet a wider range of pupil needs without affecting the quality of provision.

Tiered approaches also placed demands on space for small group work and regulation. Leaders were clear that if schools are expected to keep supporting pupils with SEND in mainstream settings, they will need more space to run short, high-quality interventions and regulation safely.

Despite these pressures, schools remained positive about the impact of tiered approaches. They allowed pupils with a wider range of needs to stay on roll, maintain relationships with peers, and access support from adults who understand their profiles.

Sustainability

The evidence from this research showed that many schools are committed to inclusion and that all 4 models can work well when the level of need does not exceed workforce capacity. Schools' ability to deliver effectively depended on how their workforce is organised, developed and supported. Internal mechanisms, including appropriate space, clear staffing models with strong co-ordination across SEND, inclusion and pastoral teams and enough staff with the right skills and expertise, were integral to the sustainability of inclusive approaches. To support this, leaders offered CPD and targeted training such as Elklan, NELI, TEACCH, trauma informed approaches, EBSA strategies and precision teaching. However, they would welcome newly qualified teachers with greater knowledge of SEND and the skills to meet pupils' needs. School would like SEND content within ITT to have a more practical focus, including how different needs present in class, how to adapt teaching without lowering expectations, how to assess progress for pupils working below age related expectations, and how to keep learning going when pupils move in and out of lessons.

Interviewees reflected that whilst TA and HLTA roles had expanded in terms of skill and level of responsibility, but pay, status and career structures have not kept pace, impacting recruitment and retention. Some schools rebranded roles (for example, LSA) and highlighted specialisms to attract graduates or practitioners with relevant backgrounds. Leaders also protected staff by planning rotas to reduce burnout in intensive settings. In a few cases, schools chose to appoint additional teachers in core subjects to reduce class sizes rather than replace some TA posts.

The distribution of pupils with SEND in some areas is uneven, so schools would also welcome external mechanisms that ensure a more equitable distribution to support inclusion. Improved access to specialist services and financial support that reflects the volume and complexity of need they are supporting were also identified as prerequisites to the expansion and sustainability of an inclusive mainstream approach.

The evidence here suggests there is an urgent need for a clear, shared definition of what inclusion in mainstream schools means and what it is intended to achieve; the lack of clarity makes it harder for schools to judge whether they are meeting expectations and to decide how best to balance the needs of pupils with SEND with other learners.

Mainstream schools often reported that to inform their decision-making and policy-development they needed more evidence on effective approaches and tools to support implementation. Experts, leaders and SENCOs also believe there remains an important role for special schools and that the existing SEND Code of Practice outlines the right process but needs better funding, implementation and accountability on the ground. The government has set out its commitment to review and modernise the SEND Code of Practice in the White Paper [Every child achieving and thriving](#).

Fostering inclusion

The evidence from SEND experts and school staff indicates that effective inclusive practice, as it relates to the school workforce relies on:

- a national definition of inclusion and realistic expectations for mainstream schools
- initial teacher training with deep SEND content
- system-wide expectations that SEND is everyone's responsibility from leaders and governors, through teachers, TAs and support staff
- high quality, evidence-based professional development for all staff grounded in practical experience
- sufficient, ring-fenced funding for specialist input, staffing and adaptations to infrastructure
- strong teacher involvement in curriculum planning and assessment, irrespective of where learning takes place, and close alignment with mainstream provision
- national and local strategies to help attract and retain skills staff, particularly TAs
- access to timely external professional input and support
- engagement with parents and pupil voice
- an accountability framework that recognises meaningful progress, not just attainment, and values inclusive practices

- strong partnership across schools, trusts and LAs to share expertise and distribute need more equitably

Appendix 1: Methodology

Sampling and recruitment

The sample frame of schools was generated from administrative data, DfE school and college voice surveys and a bespoke recruitment survey of all secondary schools and 60% of primary schools. The survey achieved 1,039 responses: 656 from primary schools and 383 from secondary schools.

The data captured in the survey was supplemented by contextual information from GIAS and the SWC. This dual approach was designed to increase the likelihood of identifying a range of models and achieving the diversity in the sample needed for the case studies by reaching a wider population than could be achieved through a recruitment survey alone. As the survey responses were received, they were analysed to identify schools that met the sample criteria. Hard quotas were set for phase. Soft quotas were set using the following criteria to ensure a cross-section of schools was consulted:

- type of SEND support provision⁴²
- proportion of pupils with SEN support (above and below average)
- proportion of pupils with an EHC plan (above and below average)
- proportion of pupils eligible for FSM
- location (urban / rural)
- ratio of pupils to teaching assistants (top 25% and not top 25%)

Staffing model, obtained from the recruitment survey, was also subject to a soft quota. This criteria encompassed the use of staff with SEND specialisms e.g. qualified SENCO, an assistant or deputy SENCO, a team working with the SENCO who fulfil some SENCO-related duties, TAs with specific SEND specialisms, teachers with a SEND specialism (e.g. dyslexia, autism), and inclusive leads within a school, MAT and/or LA separate to the SENCO.

Phase 1 – Scoping and mapping

Phase 1 of the research focused on identifying and understanding the delivery models and the different ways in which school workforces were deployed. It involved:

⁴² The models used to identify the interview sample were based on the secondary data available and differ from those developed during the mapping exercise: 1. Formal provision i.e. have LA recognised SEN unit and/or resource provision; 2. Informal provision i.e. report they have SEN unit and/or resource provision and/or special classes in GIAS, but don't have LA recognised SEN unit and/or resource provision; and 3. Other provision i.e. do not have LA recognised SEN unit and/or resource provision or report they have SEN unit and/or resource provision and/or special classes in GIAS.

- depth interviews with 12 SEND sector experts to explore how pupils with SEND are being supported in mainstream settings, recruited via the research team's established networks
- depth interviews with school leaders and SENCOs across 142 mainstream schools (80 primaries and 62 secondaries) within a range of different settings
- expert roundtable discussion comprised of SEND experts and representatives from DfE to reflect on the workforce models deployed and features and indicators of good practices

Phase 2 – Case study research

Phase 2 focused on identifying and understanding the delivery models and the different ways in which schools deployed their workforce. The research involved:

- 8 case studies highlighting the 4 key models identified at Phase 1 (1 primary and 1 secondary school for each of the models) based on insight gained in Phase 1 interviews, and approximately 3 additional interviews per school with the SENCO, a TA and another member of staff.
- 4 thematic case studies exploring cross-cutting themes. Each case study is based on one lead primary or secondary school with supporting evidence from other schools. The evidence draws upon insight from Phase 1 and follow-up interviews with senior leaders and SENCOs and wider staff.

The 4 key themes for the case studies are:

- upskilling staff to support pupils with SEND
- implementing whole school approaches
- deploying TAs innovatively
- developing internal specialist provision

All the schools interviewed in Phase 2 have outstanding or good Ofsted grades.

These anonymised case studies are presented in the main body of this report to exemplify the key findings about different workforce models and approaches to supporting pupils with SEND. The schools were selected to provide interesting examples and reflections on how staff can be used to support pupils with SEND, not to reflect perceived exemplary practice. Whilst the case studies outline the benefits of the adopted approaches, they also include the trade-offs schools consider when developing their approaches and the challenges experienced when implementing them.

The schools that took part in additional interviews in Phase 2 were incentivised through e-shopping vouchers, up to a maximum of £300 per school. Vouchers were gifted to the school when members of the SLT were interviewed and given as personal vouchers for

support staff, class teachers and middle leaders, who often gave up their personal time to be interviewed outside of school hours.

Analytical approach

The research generated a significant volume of qualitative data. A rigorous approach to data analysis was applied, combining:

- An Excel matrix that captured the high-level characteristics of the models plus fieldnotes on the contextual factors for schools consulted during Phase 1. The matrix was completed by the researcher immediately following the interview with the leader or SENCO.
- Team analysis sessions where researchers came together to review the matrix and share top of mind insights from the interviews to identify and refine the model descriptors to inform the typology.
- Detailed thematic coding in NVivo which also enabled the research team to allocate attributes, such as school level characteristics, to each transcript to allow examination of how models varied by setting.



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