



Department  
for Education

# **SEN support: Findings from a qualitative study**

**Research report**

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## Glossary

- ARP: Autism Resource Provision
- AWPU: Age Weighted Pupil Unit
- CAMHS: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- CAT: Cognitive Ability Tests
- CPD: Continuing Professional Development
- CPOMS: Child Protection Online Management System
- EHCP: Education, Health and Care Plan
- EP: Educational Psychologist
- GRSS: Graduated Response to SEND Support
- IDL: International Dyslexia Learning
- IEP: Individualised Education Plan
- ILP: Individual Learning Plan
- IRP: Individual Reading Plan
- LSA: learning support assistant
- NQT: Newly Qualified Teacher
- SaLT: Speech and Language Therapist
- SEN: Special Educational Need(s)
- SENCO: Special Educational Needs Coordinator
- SEND: special educational needs and disabilities
- SIMS: School Information Management System
- SLA: Service Level Agreement
- SLT: Senior Leadership Team
- TA: teaching assistant.

## Executive Summary

The term 'SEN Support' describes the actions taken to support pupils and students in mainstream settings who have been identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), but who do not have an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Pupils receiving SEN support comprise just over 12% of all pupils in England. This report presents findings from a qualitative study conducted with mainstream primary and secondary school leaders and teachers to explore their approaches to identifying the needs of pupils receiving SEN support, how they meet these needs, and how they evaluate the effectiveness of the support provided.

The findings are based on 60 interviews conducted from March – May 2021 with 15 primary teachers, 15 primary leaders, 15 secondary teachers and 15 secondary leaders, sampled from the Department for Education's (DfE's) Panel Study of Leaders and Teachers.

### Identifying pupils with SEN

Schools generally had well-established, systemised approaches to the identification of SEN. Virtually all schools used Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) assessments, input from parents, SEN specialists and information from previous education settings to determine pupil needs. Slightly fewer, but still the majority, used test/exam results.

Identification of a potential SEN usually started with a concern being raised by a teacher about a pupil based on either the quality of their work, comprehension of tasks, or engagement and behaviour in lessons. Other sources of information that could alert the school to a possible SEN were baseline testing and, less commonly, concerns raised by parents.

Typically, the teacher would then notify the SENCO, who would gather and collate information about the pupil from various members of staff and if necessary, observe the pupil in a classroom setting. They would also undertake assessments and discuss the issue with the child's parents. The SENCO's role is to build a comprehensive picture of the child's school life and home life, their needs and therefore what the school could offer that pupil.

The final phase of the process was the decision-making phase, deciding if the pupil required SEN support, and how to deliver this. This could include deciding whether to bring in external support (for identification of need and/or to decide the likely best support) or use the resources and knowledge in the school to provide for the pupil. The decision to consult external SEN specialists (such as Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs) or Educational Psychologist (EPs)) typically depended on the school's ability to



identify the exact nature of the need, the perceived complexity of the need, but was also influenced by the availability / accessibility of external SEN support specialists. This is the phase of the process where pupil support plans were usually developed.

## **Meeting the needs of pupils with SEN**

Meeting the needs of pupils with SEN centred on a range of interventions, programmes, workshops and additional teaching assistance which seek to develop pupils' emotional, social, physical and mental wellbeing. One of the most common themes raised for meeting the needs of pupils with SEN was adopting an inclusive and engaging teaching style in the classroom that catered for a range of abilities and needs, for example Quality First Teaching.

As with identification of needs, the SENCO's role was instrumental in making decisions on provision and how best to help pupils of differing abilities access education and reach their potential. In both primary and secondary schools, teaching assistants (TAs) were key to delivery, and tended to have in-depth knowledge of the pupil which they could feed back to the SENCO and classroom teacher.

## **Reviewing and evaluating the progress of pupils with SEN**

Reviewing and evaluating the progress of pupils receiving SEN support was generally the least developed aspect of schools' SEN support delivery and many schools did not have a formal process of review in place. However, most schools did have an approach to tracking SEN support, usually involving a mix of:

- Dedicated tracking systems for pupils with SEN (including both pupils receiving SEN support and pupils with an EHCP), gathering data from teachers, TAs, the SENCO and members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT);
- 'Whole-school' (all pupils) tracking systems through which the progress of pupils on SEN support could be assessed; and
- Ad-hoc approaches based on informal feedback following teacher-led assessment.

SENCOs were again critical to the process, holding all parties (teachers, school leaders, TAs, learning support assistants (LSAs) and any external specialists) to account, progressing the review process, and ensuring that teachers and TAs were following the correct processes.

Schools used a range of packages to track their SEN support provision, with data tracking systems falling into three main categories:

- ‘Whole-school’ IT systems, such as SIMS (School Information Management System);
- SEN-specific, or behavioural monitoring packages; and
- In-house systems (using Excel or Word).

A couple of teachers urged caution in over-reliance on IT to track SEN support, highlighting how a child’s progress can change quickly, and emphasising the importance of incorporating a qualitative element (rather than just progress against targets) and of constant observation and obtaining a 360-degree view from all those involved (including the pupil) and of ‘round table’ meetings with all teaching staff involved.

Schools did not tend to talk about success of SEN support in relation to pupils receiving SEN support no longer needing support. It was more likely to be measured in terms of meeting targets within the agreed time (e.g., exam results or behaviour targets, or ‘softer’ wellbeing targets around general engagement in the classroom).

## **Respondent reflections on SEN support**

Most schools felt they were performing well with regard to support for pupils receiving SEN support. When asked about what works well in their process of SEN support, most spoke in relatively general terms, as shown in the following;

- SEN support being a high priority within the SLT;
- It being a key part of the school’s ethos;
- The school having a good reputation locally for its SEN work; and
- The time and energy spent by the SENCO and SEN department (where applicable) on reviewing progress made by pupils with SEN.

Challenges to better delivery of SEN support included:

- Difficulties accessing external specialists as quickly as they would like, because of high demand, or limited budgets;
- A lack of time in the SEN team to assess and evaluate the suitability of provision for pupils receiving SEN support and the effectiveness of its delivery;
- A lack of in-class TA availability to support pupils receiving SEN support who do not have an EHCP;
- Large class sizes adversely impacting timely identification and delivery of SEN support.

## Improvement suggestions for schools

Although most schools considered that they were performing well with regard to support for pupils receiving SEN support, a number of suggestions were made for where they could make improvements. These included:

- More regular training and feedback to staff to keep them informed and up to date on the school's processes on SEN identification and delivery. Two groups were felt to be particular priorities:
  - New staff, where it was felt to be important to ensure they receive training as early as possible after joining the school on the school's processes for SEN identification and delivery;
  - Learning support assistants, where more training would increase their confidence in supporting pupils receiving SEN support.
- Schools need to ensure that their approach to assessments of SEN is based on systematic, standardised and nationally available tests;
- Schools need to ensure that when pupils transfer to new educational settings, timely and quality data about the child's SEN is provided to the new setting;
- The effectiveness of school's SEN support system should be regularly reviewed, taking account of the views of teaching staff, the SENCO and the SLT, as well as parents/carers of those receiving SEN support, with results of these reviews fed back to all staff to help improve future interventions.

# Introduction

## Background

Many children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream settings receive support and provision from resources already available within the school. This is known as SEN support, a system which the SEND Code of Practice<sup>1</sup> describes as part of a graduated approach to identifying and meeting SEN, and which is defined as a process of Assess, Plan, Do and Review. The purpose of SEN support is to minimise the impact of their special educational need and to help develop their educational and social skills. The range of support that schools put in place to meet these needs can include extra help from a teacher or assistant, help taking part in class activities, extra encouragement in their learning, help communicating with other children, or support with physical or personal care difficulties. Some of the additional provision may focus on behaviour and the pupils' ability to socialise and communicate with others, reading and writing skills, physical capabilities as well as the ability to concentrate on and understand tasks.

SEN support is the core level of support for pupils with SEN but without an EHC plan. Should a child require additional resources that the existing schools SEN support system does not include, then they can apply for a more detailed education, health and care (EHC) plan, which outlines the educational, health and social needs of the individual and the specific provisions in place to support them.

SEN support is the focus of this research study.

## The aims and objectives of the research

This research focussed on provision for pupils receiving SEN support rather than those with an EHC plan, and aimed to understand the processes in place in relation to:

- Identifying pupils that may have SEN support needs;
- Meeting the needs of pupils receiving SEN support; and
- Evaluating whether those needs have been met.

The purpose of the research was to understand the most common approaches adopted by schools in relation to these three areas of SEN support, as well as the variation in approach, perceived best practice, and the challenges associated with each stage of the

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<sup>1</sup> [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years](#)

SEN support process (identifying need, meeting those needs, and evaluating the effectiveness of the support).

The report includes case studies on schools exhibiting distinct approaches at each stage of the SEN support process.

## Methodology

The research involved a total of 60 qualitative interviews with leaders and teachers in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. Interviews were conducted via telephone and video-conferencing platforms (MS Teams and Zoom). Fieldwork took place from 1<sup>st</sup> March to 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The discussions lasted an average of 45 minutes.

The topic guide explored leaders' and teachers' experiences with pupils receiving SEN (i.e., excluding pupils with an EHCP). Questions focused on the period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the process of delivering SEN support was heavily impacted by the pandemic (when most pupils were engaging in remote education).

## Sampling

The sample for the project came from the DfE Panel of Leaders and Teachers, a panel of roughly 3,500 leaders and teachers in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England.

The sampling applied quotas to achieve an equal split of primary and secondary leaders and teachers (15 in each group). Within these quotas, a random sample of leaders and teachers was taken to achieve a good mix of respondents across a range of personal characteristics and school-level factors, including:

- Age and gender;
- Length of time in teaching;
- School status (academy or maintained);
- Region.
- School size;
- Ofsted rating;
- School FSM quintile; and
- School urban/rural status.

This sampling approach means that the findings presented in this report represent the views of leaders and teachers in a range of mainstream education settings and reflect a breadth of experience in relation to SEN support.

The tables below show the split of achieved interviews across a range of key demographics.

**Table 1. Achieved interviews, by phase and level**

		Level		
		Leader	Teacher	Total
Phase	Primary	15	15	30
	Secondary	15	15	30
	Total	30	30	60

**Table 2. Achieved interviews, by school-level variables**

Urban/rural status	Urban	47
	Rural	13
FSM quintile	Quintile 1 (lowest proportion)	10
	Quintile 2	18
	Quintile 3	10
	Quintile 4	17
	Quintile 5 (highest proportion)	5
Ofsted rating	Outstanding	9
	Good	36
	Requires improvement	6
	Unknown	9

By region, typically 5-9 interviews were conducted in each, though more were undertaken in London (11) and the South East (11), and fewer in the North East (2) and the South West (3).

## **Interview analysis**

Each interview writeup was entered into an analysis framework / grid, the purpose of which was to organise qualitative data into discrete topic areas, enabling comparative analysis between interviews and by school and respondent type.

Once all writeups had been entered into the framework, extra columns were added to the framework for unique themes emerging in each topic area. Responses were then coded up into these themes, enabling researchers to establish the most and least common themes in each topic area.

## **Interpreting the findings**

It is worth noting that the findings presented here are not intended to be representative of all mainstream primary and secondary schools in England but reflect the most common experiences across a broad range of school types. This exploratory research is intended to understand the range of practices undertaken by schools in relation to SEN support.

## **Structure of the report**

The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1 looks at SEN support in schools at an overall level.
- Chapter 2 focuses on the practices schools engage in for the identification of SEN.
- Chapter 3 looks at how schools go about meeting needs, from the provisions they put in place to the role of specific groups in delivery of provision.
- Chapter 4 examines how schools approach evaluating and reviewing whether the support they provide to pupils is meeting need.
- Chapter 5 summarises the findings from the research and explores future research that could be done in this area.

## Chapter 1: SEN support within the school setting

A special educational need or disability (SEND) can impact a child or young person's ability to learn, such as their:

- Behaviour or ability to socialise, for example they struggle to make friends;
- Reading and writing skill development;
- Ability to comprehend tasks and activities;
- Concentration levels, for example because they have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD);
- Physical ability.

Many children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) receive support and provision from resources already available within the school. This is known as SEN support. The purpose of SEN support is to minimise the impact of a pupil's special educational need and to help develop their educational and social skills. The range of support that schools put in place to meet these needs can include extra help from a teacher or assistant, help taking part in class activities, extra encouragement in their learning, help communicating with other children or support with physical or personal care difficulties. SEN support is the focus of this research study.

However, some children or young people's needs may be deemed more significant and complex, requiring additional support beyond what the school is normally able to provide. In these cases, an education, health and care assessment is undertaken, and this can then lead to an education, health and care (EHC) plan being drawn up which outlines the pupils' needs, provisions and progress, and their individualised funding. Children with an EHCP are usually entitled to extra one-to-one support and will be more likely to have outside agencies involved in their support, such as physiotherapists, behavioural experts or sensory impairment specialists. In January 2021 there were 430,700 children and young people with EHCPs in England.

Data for 2020/21<sup>2</sup> indicated that:

- 3.7% of all pupils in schools in England in the January 2021 had an EHC plan, a rise from 3.3% in 2020 and 3.1% in 2019;
- A further 12.2% of all pupils have SEN support, without an EHC plan, up from 12.1% in 2020 and 11.9% in 2019;

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<sup>2</sup> [Special educational needs in England, Academic Year 2020/21](#)



- The most common type of need for pupils with an EHC plan is Autistic Spectrum Disorders and for pupils with SEN support is Speech, Language and Communication needs;
- SEN is more prevalent in boys than girls, with boys representing 73.1% of all pupils with an EHC plan and 64.2% of pupils with SEN support.

This chapter covers contextual information on SEN support within schools, including:

- The number of pupils with SEN, including those with EHC plans;
- Leaders' and teachers' views of the relationship between SEN support and EHCPs;
- The role of SENCOs;
- How provision for pupils receiving SEN support is funded by schools; and
- The extent to which EHCP funding influences the support available to pupils receiving SEN support, and the similarities and differences between the two types of support.

## Prevalence

There was a wide variation in the number of pupils with SEN within the primary and secondary schools covered by the research. On average, among the schools covered in the research, there were around 90 pupils with SEN support in secondary schools and 30 within primary schools, of which an average of five with EHC plans in primary schools and 20 in secondary schools.

## Differences between SEN support and EHCPs

While leaders and teachers were clear that there are differences in the support delivered to those with EHCPs and those receiving SEN support (which arise from the additional funding for those with EHCPs, their having more intense support needs, more individualised TA support, and guaranteed access to external specialist support) there was a common sentiment that they treat all pupils with SEN equally to the extent that the goal is to ensure that each pupil's particular needs are met.

Some primary and secondary teachers said they felt more personally responsible for pupils receiving SEN support since those on EHCPs typically receive more direct and individualised support from TAs.

For some pupils, receiving SEN support was seen as a first step towards an EHCP, but for others this was not the case, and it was felt that many would not need SEN support indefinitely. Some respondents demonstrated an awareness of the interplay between childhood development and SEN (whereby need may only become apparent over time, or a possible SEN may reflect typical differences in development). This was particularly evident in primary school settings.

“There is a hope that those on SEN support will make progress and that will be enough.” - *Primary leader, West Midlands*

“The main difference is the amount of the support and the intensity.” - *Primary leader, South East*

“We don't go SEND to get to an EHCP...but ultimately, if we're unable to meet the needs with the provision that we're able to provide, then we would be looking for potentially an EHCP.” - *Secondary leader, West Midlands*

“It's all part of the same system and it's all linked, and where we can, we will borrow from the priority group of those with an EHCP, but it's very creative and we have to get the maximum provision we can.” - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

Leaders and teachers reported a range of factors that influenced their thinking on the relationship between SEN support and EHCP support. These were:

- Approaches to supporting pupils in both groups in the classroom;
- Differences in funding;
- Differences in consistency of delivery; and
- Differences in access to external support.

These are discussed in the following sections.

## **Approaches to supporting pupils with SEND**

Leaders and teachers frequently reported that their approach to teaching pupils receiving SEN support and those with an EHCP did not differ. In many instances, the two systems were integrated, with support for pupils in both groups tailored according to need.

## Funding

With the increased funding that comes with an EHCP, pupils received more individualised assistance and more consistent support. For example, students with an EHCP tended to receive dedicated one-to-one support from TAs and had greater access to external specialists such as Speech and Language Therapist (SaLTs) and Educational Psychologist (EPs).

“If you assess for an EHCP and this is successful the level of support increases, it is just a continuum of need as far as we are concerned and we match resources accordingly.” - *Secondary leader, Yorkshire and Humber*

Leaders and teachers generally reported that checks were in place to ensure that EHCP funding was appropriately assigned to pupils with an EHCP, although there were instances of knock-on benefits for pupils on SEN support. For example, EHCP funding meant that schools could often afford to hire additional TAs, which could benefit pupils receiving SEN support (if for example those TAs had spare time in lessons). Similarly, where EHCP funding was used to purchase additional software or intervention programmes these could be used by all pupils receiving SEN support.

## Consistency of delivery

Respondents reported that the increased funding for pupils with an EHCP lends itself to more consistent and individualised support. This is contrasted with SEN support, where the support was often described as group focused rather than individually focused. Although this was due to the level of funding, it also reflected the level of need. Pupils with an EHCP tended to require one-to-one support because of additional health needs, whereas for pupils receiving SEN support the group approach was often appropriate, and felt to be more inclusive than one-to-one support.

## Internal vs. external support

Access to external specialists was challenging without an EHCP. Consequently, those who were on the SEN register but without an EHCP tended to be supported internally through the school's SEN support system. Many respondents found this frustrating because they had pupils with SEN who would benefit from specialist support but were viewed as a lower priority.

## **Funding of SEN support**

### **Central school budget**

All schools referenced their central budget in relation to SEN provision, with some mentioning specific budget streams within the central budget, for example, the training budget being used for training TAs and teachers to aid their delivery of inclusive and adaptable Quality First Teaching.

### **SEN budget from the local authority**

For some schools, additional SEN funding came from the local authority, based on the level of need in the school – i.e., how many pupils with SEN they have and how many hours of support they need. This budget was provided to schools with the expressed purpose of meeting the needs of pupils receiving SEN support. Academy schools were also eligible for this funding source.

### **Pupil premium grant**

Pupil premium funding is provided to all publicly funded schools in England with the purpose of improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils within their school.<sup>3</sup> Although this funding is not explicitly intended for pupils receiving SEN support, leaders and teachers reported that due to the overlap between pupils in these groups, pupils in the SEN support group do benefit from the pupil premium grant. In some schools, the pupil premium grant was used to obtain additional TA support and home-schooling workers for pupils with SEN.

### **Additional funding sources: top up funding**

Many additional funding sources were mentioned, including Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) and top-up EHCP funding.

## **Perceptions of funding**

Lack of funding was often cited as a key barrier to providing the desired level and quality of SEN support. This was compounded by the fact that where money had been invested in high-quality, specialist training, a high turnover of staff could lead to loss of knowledge and experience supporting pupils with SEN. This led to some leaders reporting that they often had to go 'back to square one' with their internal support offering.

Furthermore, pressures on funding meant that TAs were typically the first to be cut by schools. SEN support was felt to suffer as a result.

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<sup>3</sup> [Pupil premium](#)

"I think it's a shame that really good resources aren't made available to everybody because it can be dependent on the budget." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

"It's a budget. It's not the size it needs to be for the number of children [we have] with needs." - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

## **Extent to which EHCP funding affects the SEN support available**

When schools receive funding for pupils with EHCPs, they tended to immediately assign this resource to provisions and support for these pupils. Respondents were clear that EHCP resources were always assigned fairly and appropriately. However, many pointed out that this could have indirect benefits for pupils receiving SEN support. For example, there were instances when training for a child with an EHCP was implemented with other children in the school (e.g., SaLT training); and software, purchased for pupils with an EHCP, could also be used by other pupils receiving SEN support.

Additionally, in circumstances where a TA who was assigned to a pupil with an EHC plan, but who was not requiring one-to-one support consistently throughout the lesson, they would assist, observe and 'check in' with pupils receiving SEN support, and more generally additional TAs benefitted pupils receiving SEN support due to reduced pressure on the main classroom teacher.

"Obviously you have to be professional and very sensitive about it because if a parent has fought for those hours, they want the hours going to that child [with an EHCP]. But there are times when a child could be working independently for 20 minutes on a task and it would be fruitless to have an adult watching the child rather than working with another small group. That would be a really good use of time where that LSA's skills were spread to a small group of three or four children as opposed to just one." - *Primary teacher, London*

"Funding for EHCP will go immediately to those with a plan because that is the priority of the funding. However, the purchasing of specific software for EHCP pupils does then benefit those students who have SEN but not EHCP." - *Secondary leader, Yorkshire and Humber*

## **Typical role of the SENCO**

Findings from the research highlighted the multifaceted role of SENCOs. In most schools, the SENCO's role was to oversee all stages of support for all pupils with SEND within the

school, ensuring that necessary provisions have been put in place and that they were meeting need. The SENCO:

- Liaised with SEN specialists;
- Produced reports that summarise pupil progress;
- Liaised with and trained teachers and TAs to help them identify and meet the needs of pupils with SEN;
- Updated pupil profiles (e.g. Individual Education Plans (IEP));
- Led meetings to discuss effectiveness of interventions and progress of pupils with SEN; and
- Communicated with parents to ensure that they are included throughout the process.

SENCOs were viewed as the conduit through which the school's SEN support activities were delivered. Although they led on SEN support, their responsibilities varied depending on the size of the school and its SEN team. SENCOs with a larger SEN team, consisting of specialist TAs and support staff, tended to delegate responsibilities for tasks, including delivery of SEN support provision training, or direct engagement with teachers. This enabled them to focus on liaison duties (e.g., with parents and specialists) and administrative duties (e.g., updating files, applying for funding, sourcing new interventions). Consequently, some of the teachers that we spoke to in larger schools were less familiar with the role of SENCO as they had not had much direct contact.

Almost all SENCOs worked full-time, though many had additional roles (e.g., the Head, Deputy Headteacher or classroom teaching). Where the SENCO was full-time in their role without additional responsibilities, this was almost exclusively within secondary schools.

The SENCO tended to be the most active member of staff delivering SEN support, however the SENCO usually had relatively little direct involvement with pupils. This tended to be a result of the extensive responsibilities of the SENCO and their having a small SEN team.

"It's a shame really, she has a lot of expertise and it would be brilliant if she could, but she does not have the capacity. A lot of her time, unfortunately, is spent doing paperwork ... she chats a lot with teachers ... she is good at enabling teachers to provide support, and at supporting TAs." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

"I think she would have more knowledge of the children if she was working with them. But she seems more in a managerial role of SEN, than on the ground and working with the kids." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

"She's only part-time, so if she wasn't here then they [teachers] would come to me. But if she was here, then they would go to her primarily." - *Primary leader, South East*

## Chapter 2: SEN support and identification of need

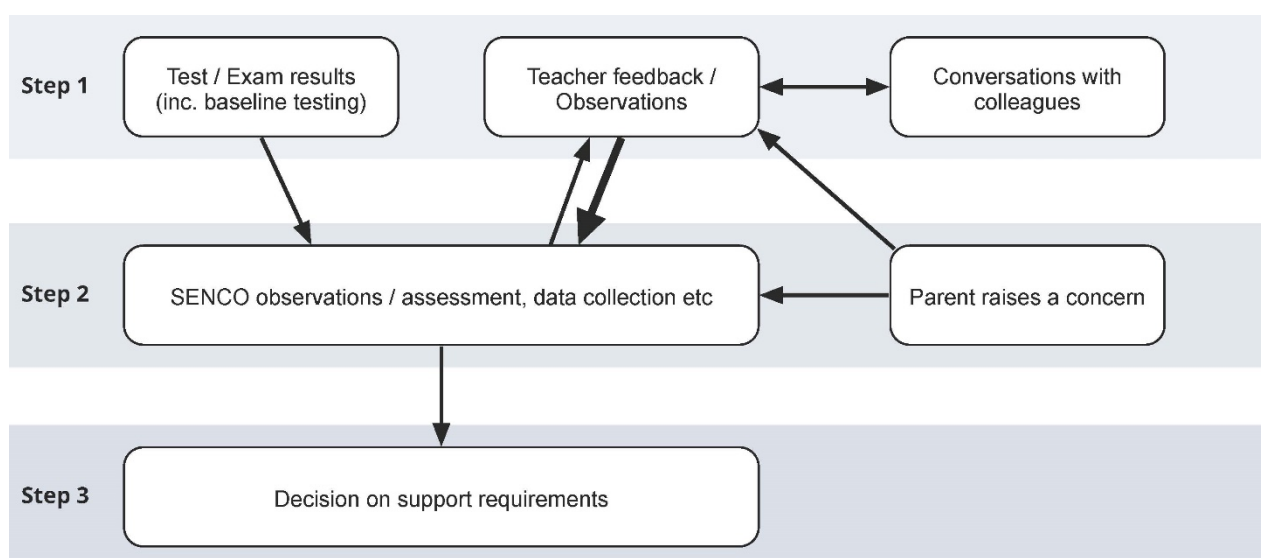
This chapter examines the overall approach taken by schools in identifying pupils who may have a SEN, focusing solely on the identification of new need. Specifically, it covers:

- The typical steps involved in the process of identifying a SEN (and the variation in approaches between schools);
- The role of specific processes, such as SENCO assessments and teacher observations, in the identification process; and
- The successes and challenges of schools' approaches.

At an overall level, schools generally had a well-established approach to the identification of SEN. Leaders and teachers reported that their school used a range of resources throughout the process, including SENCO assessments, input from teachers and pupils' parents, and test and exam results. There was a strong sense that the process of SEN identification is a team effort, involving staff at all levels of the school (from TAs through to school leaders), to ensure that suitable provision is put in place.

### Process for identification of SEN

Generally speaking, there was no catch-all starting point in the identification of SEN. Most schools reported that the identification process started from a 'concern being raised', but the source of this differed dependent on the pupil. Sometimes a SEN would be highlighted through baseline testing on entry to the school, for others it would be a result of teacher observation of their behaviour, for others the starting point can be a concern from a parent/carer. The following figure highlights the key stages and elements of the process, which are then described in detail in the rest of the chapter.





## Step 1: initial identification of a potential SEN issue

Initial identification of a potential SEN typically came through teacher observations or test or exam results, though sometimes the starting point can be a concern raised by a parent or carer.

Teacher observations was the most common route to the identification of a SEN. Teachers and leaders commonly reported that due to their proximity to – and time spent with – the pupil, teachers were the most likely group to identify when a pupil is struggling or falling behind. This can manifest in a number of ways, from inability to pay attention in class, to a lack of progress on schoolwork or more serious emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Schools also commonly reported that a possible SEN is often first identified through testing either through dedicated baseline testing on entry to the school, or more regular classroom and formalised end-of-year testing where lack of progress or poor results may indicate a potential issue.

"I would say that the observations and the feedback from the teachers are probably the most useful because that's the day-to-day observations." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

When teachers identify a potential issue, in nearly all schools the teacher would be expected to inform the SENCO directly through channels agreed by the SEN team. The formality of this varied, from:

- Face-to-face discussions;
- A dedicated SEN support / concern form submitted to the SENCO; and
- Written feedback (typically via email).

Some teachers were also expected to feed back their observations in staff meetings, and in some instances dedicated SEN review meetings or pupil progress meetings. The type of meeting where this information is shared reveals differences in how structured schools' approaches are to SEN, with schools convening SEN meetings providing greater space for discussion around pupils' needs.

"Every week there is a formalised SEND meeting amongst staff whereby members will share their views/concerns. There are regular meetings between teachers and TAs every 3 weeks. This meeting gives the TA the chance to share their concerns." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

## Step 2: collating further evidence of potential SEN issue

Once a possible need is identified, the typical next step for the teacher was to notify the SENCO.. Escalation to the SENCO was instigated in a range of ways. Some schools had a formal approach whereby a teacher would submit a designated SEN form detailing their concerns. Other approaches included updating pupil profiles, entering information on internal pupil monitoring systems (such as Child Protection Online Management System (CPOMS)), and raising concerns in staff meetings (such as pupil progress meetings). More informal approaches involved meeting with the SENCO or sharing information with them electronically (over email).

“If the teacher has a concern about a pupil who isn't yet on the SEN register and wants to alert the SENCO, a GRSS [Graduated Response to SEND Support]<sup>4</sup> has to be completed. When they have their three-times-a-year tracking meetings with their Senior Leadership Teams about children's progress, if there is someone [a pupil] who is below where they should be for reading, writing and maths then that section of the GRSS should be completed to identify their needs.” - *Primary leader, South West*

The SENCO's role at this point encompassed a range of activities, from pooling evidence from other sources (e.g., other teachers at the school, or parents), conducting informal observations or formal assessments, and administering screening tests (which test for specific additional needs e.g. dyslexia screening tests). Their role in the process was to advance understanding of the pupil's situation and formally identify a SEN.

Once a school had become aware of a possible SEN, some would then speak to the previous educational setting to verify what they had observed. This was much more common among, though not exclusive, to secondary schools.

## Step 3: decision on SEN support

The next stage was the decision-making stage of the process where the SENCO and leadership team will discuss whether they can meet the needs of the pupil internally and whether referral to a SEN specialist is required to assist the school in identifying specific interventions and the appropriate next steps.

The SENCO would then convey this information to the relevant school staff, so all are aware of the needs of a specific pupil and how to go about meeting that need.

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<sup>4</sup> GRSS is a tool which is updated by teachers where they have concerns about a pupil's progress.

## Elements in the identification of SEN

The remainder of the chapter looks in detail at elements of the process in identifying pupils with SEN, namely:

- SENCO assessments;
- Test and exam results;
- Input from SEN specialists;
- Parental involvement; and
- Information from previous educational settings.

### SENCO assessments

SENCO assessments were used in the process of identifying SEN by almost all schools, and were instigated to corroborate teachers' observations and feedback, or less commonly following a concern raised by a parent. SENCO assessments generally involved classroom observation and / or administration of specialist tests.

Classroom observation involved the SENCO sitting in the classroom and observing the child (e.g., their engagement levels) and the teacher (e.g., their teaching style) during one or several lessons, dependent on the child's need. The aim of classroom observations was generally to collect further 'soft' data on the child's experience of the classroom setting and inform future assessments, specialist referrals or whether their needs could be catered for by the school.

The other key facet of SENCO assessments was the administration of specialist tests to screen for SEN. SENCOs tended to be the individual within the school with the expertise to administer screening tools for specific conditions such as dyslexia, ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) as well as more all-purpose cognitive testing such as Cognitive Ability Tests (CAT). The timing of this differed between schools, with some preferring to wait until classroom observations had taken place and others likely to use assessments more readily, without prior observation having been done. The reason for this depended on capacity within the SEN team, the anticipated need of the pupil, and the schools' commitment to baseline testing.

SENCO assessments were also an opportunity for information flow from the SEN department to teachers, with the SENCO giving teachers and TAs advice about strategies they could employ in their classroom (prior to the delivery of SEN support). There were also a few instances where a SENCO might alert a teacher to another child with potential SEN during these observations. These examples demonstrate the close

relationship between the SENCO and teaching staff in schools that focus on staff relationships to establish need.

In a handful of cases, SENCO assessments did not involve direct observation or administering tests but relied solely on assessing a range of evidence sources provided by teaching staff, such as test results (both formal and informal), schoolwork examples, teacher observation writeups, and specific SEN 'forms' completed by teachers. This approach tended to be taken where teachers or SEN specialists (e.g., SaLTs, EPs) administered screening tests, rather than the SENCO.

### **Outcome of SENCO assessments**

The outcome of SENCO assessments was typically a decision about next steps for the pupil, suggesting this is one of the key resources used by schools in determining whether a pupil needs SEN support. The next steps typically involved agreeing whether or not to put the pupil on the SEN register, liaising with specialists to conduct more bespoke testing for specific types of SEN, and putting a support plan in place for the pupil. Some schools also reported that the SENCO would write a formalised report containing recommendations for the pupil.

### **Challenges associated with SENCO assessments**

SENCO assessments were generally considered to be a critical step in the process of identifying SEN, and the vast majority of leaders and teachers were positive about their role. There were, however, some teachers in large secondary schools that were unsure about what the assessments conducted by the SENCO entailed, and others felt directly observing the pupil in class was the most reliable way to pick up complex social and emotional needs.

"We basically have key objectives, and it's more a day to day in-lesson monitoring rather than formalised at the end of every scheme of work." - *Primary leader, East of England*

"We do track the child's progress and this may help identify where there is an issue, but it's not a formal thing." - *Primary teacher, North West*

"By the time we test students, we know if they have an additional learning need." - *Secondary teacher, West Midlands*

## Test and exam results

While most schools used test and exam results in the process of identifying SEN, some preferred to place less emphasis on exams and more on classroom observations.

### Baseline testing vs. classroom testing

Schools typically used ad-hoc classroom tests or end-of-year exam results in the process of identifying SEN, but some used baseline testing on entry to the school to determine pupil's level of knowledge based on the expectations of the curriculum at each key stage. These are generally used to determine whether a pupil has a specific difficulty in a particular key skills area (e.g., verbal, non-verbal, numerical reasoning), to enable tracking of progress over time, and to pick up learning needs that may have been missed by the previous educational establishment.

"From those baseline tests, pupils then get a score that is monitored closely every half term, in terms of their progress.... it might be a drop in progress or a significantly low progress score that would identify an SEN." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

"After a round of testing the year 7s, we found a pupil who had managed to get all the way through primary school and absolutely needed speech therapy, but nothing had been put in place for him before he came to us." - *Secondary teacher, West Midlands*

Leaders and teachers that reported that they use ad-hoc classroom or end-of-year exam results, tended to use current and predicted grades over time to track whether a pupil is making expected progress as they move through the school. Schools considered this approach to be particularly useful where SEN has not manifested in the classroom.

### Outcome of test/exam results

The outcome of test and exam results was typically to flag a concern with the SENCO for them to conduct further assessments and undertake increased monitoring of the pupil. Evidence collected from testing was also used to access specialists and external support or liaise with parents. This was particularly evident in complex circumstances that were beyond the expertise of the school.

### Challenges associated with test/exam results

Schools that did not use formal test and exam results as a key means to identify SEN typically reported that identification of SEN occurs on an ongoing basis throughout the year, suggesting that exams would only confirm or underpin what is already known about

a pupil. In these schools, more importance was placed on teacher observations in the classroom.

"We usually already know where the children are... if the teachers were using a formalised assessment at the end of the year and hadn't realised that a child was behind, then I have really bad teachers." - *Primary leader, South East*

"Exam results are used and can be useful but working with the child in the classroom will show you more." - *Primary leader, East Midlands*

## **Input from SEN specialists in the identification of SEN**

### **When are SEN specialists involved?**

Input from SEN specialists, such as Educational Psychologists (EPs) or Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs) was a key part of the process of identifying pupils who may have a SEN. Most leaders and teachers reported that their schools used specialists in some capacity.

Specialists were typically brought in following internal discussions after teacher observations had raised initial concerns and used when the school was unsure of the exact nature of the child's specific learning needs. There was no evidence of specialist involvement in observing pupils before a potential SEN concern had been raised by the school. This was even the case for the minority of schools that employed SEN specialists directly. This approach was adopted for a range of reasons, although cost and availability of specialists were the main reasons noted by leaders and teachers.

### **How are SEN specialists involved?**

The role of SEN specialists in the identification of SEN is multifaceted. Most commonly, it involved experts coming into the school to conduct assessments, observations, or shadow pupils during the school day in order to provide a formal evaluation of their additional needs. The purpose of their visits (whether to observe, assess or shadow) was dependent on the anticipated needs of the pupil and the school's knowledge or understanding of the pupil's need. For instance, if a school was aware of a need but unsure of the exact nature of the need, specialists would be involved in a more comprehensive capacity – to initiate suitable provisions as well as observe the pupils' progress.

"Sometimes we do get other external agents in, depending on what the needs are really, just to have someone come in and observe this child." - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

Another key part of a SEN specialist's role was to provide advice or recommendations on next steps for the school. It was common for these leaders and teachers to report that the value of SEN specialists is their ability to provide a second opinion or impart knowledge about a disability that would allow the school to put suitable support measures in place.

"EPs and SaLTs have been brought in to do assessments in the past. They will write a report on what they think the child's needs are, then help the school to draw up suitable strategies/interventions. It's very useful for target setting, understanding what their needs are, how am I going to be able to support them, what could the parent do at home." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

### **Where schools source SEN specialists from**

The vast majority of SEN specialists were 'brought in' from external sources. By and large, leaders and teachers reported that SEN specialists were obtained via a local authority SLA (Service Level Agreement) whereby schools have access to a package of support from SEN specialists.

Only a small group of leaders and teachers reported that their school has in-house specialists – these were most likely to be a SaLT, with access to other specialists made via referral. Schools with in-house specialists were most likely to be academies, suggesting that academy schools may use specialists across their network of schools.

### **Challenges associated with SEN specialists**

The challenges associated with SEN specialists centred around access and expense. Due to long referral waiting lists and the cost of visits (which tend to be funded from the school budget) some leaders and teachers reported that SEN specialist are used as a 'last resort' when the school does not have the expertise or capacity to review a particular pupil.

"SEN specialists are unlikely to be involved in the initial stages of SEN...they are only brought in if there is a need we do not have the resource for." - *Primary leader, West Midlands*

## Pupils' parents

Parental involvement was seen as an important element in the process of identifying SEN. All leaders and teachers reported that they involved parents in the process because they were seen to provide vital insights into their child's overall development.

### When are parents involved?

For most schools, parents were involved in the early stages of the identification of SEN, when a concern had been raised by a teacher. It was rare for parents to only be approached about the development of their child after SENCO assessments had confirmed a possible SEN.

It was far more common for the school to initiate the contact with the parent than for a parent to contact the school with a concern about their child's attainment or behaviour. This was because baseline testing and feedback from teachers would alert the school to a possible SEN issue soon after transition to the school.

"Parents do sometimes come to us with a concern, but generally that is the least used way of identifying needs. We usually have to point out to the parents what our concerns are and that we think special support is needed." - *Secondary leader, South East*

"[When parents are involved] that is very helpful, and it just means that things get done quicker, and when parents are involved it has a massive impact on the kind of support and the provisions achieved." - *Primary teacher, East of England*

### How are parents involved?

Generally speaking, the parent's role in the process of identification of SEN was to contribute wider information about the child. By understanding the context – for instance, a pupil's behaviour at home, relationship with siblings and parents – schools were better able to establish the extent of a pupil's needs. In this sense, schools and parents worked in partnership to build a comprehensive picture of the child's school and home life.

"Family traits they may have noticed [in their child, that may negatively impact their learning]... I have a child with extreme anxiety and quite depressive symptoms; the family were instrumental and open about what they've seen and how that might marry with what we've seen." - *Primary teacher, South East*



"We need to look at the whole picture and the whole child; there could be a million different reasons as to why a child is behaving a certain way." - *Primary teacher, North West*

Linked to this, it was common for leaders and teachers to report an 'open door' policy, encouraging a free flow of information between parents and schools. Schools felt this openness enabled both parties to feel comfortable expressing concerns about a child's progress or learning. Schools consistently reported that parents were kept informed at each stage of the identification process, with the necessary consent obtained at each stage, as required.

### **Challenges associated with parental involvement**

Although parents and schools were usually felt to be in agreement about a pupil's needs, there were occasions when this was not the case. This was usually when schools felt parents were reluctant for their child to be labelled as having a SEN. In these instances, schools reported working hard to alleviate any concerns or anxieties parents may have.

"We would approach parents when we were going to do something differently [for the pupil], generally parents would be very supportive. Basically, we're not labelling the kid, we're just saying they seem to be struggling with this or they need some help with that and we're going to provide this, and parents are very happy." - *Secondary leader, South East*

"We serve quite a diverse community and often there is some hesitancy or maybe some embarrassment around SEN and having your child labelled as SEN." - *Secondary leader, North West*

## Large secondary school in London with a data-led approach to SEN support

### **Overarching process to identifying SEN**

The school uses a range of resources to identify pupils who may have a possible SEN. They use baseline testing to gauge each pupil's numeracy and literacy skills, and CAT testing at the start of year 7. They also use reports from their feeder primary schools to inform their decisions around SEN support.

However, what sets the school apart is a monitoring process whereby subject teachers and specialist SEN teachers thoroughly monitor individual pupil performance during the first three weeks of term. Information gathered from this process informs a meeting during which the SLT and form tutors discuss the SEN needs of each tutor group in turn. This approach is written into the school's monitoring and data arrangements and informs further data collection activities, adapted to the needs of each pupil.

### **Role of specific groups**

Teacher feedback consists of a monitoring form which teachers use to provide information, explaining if there are any pupils in their class who may have a SEN. This data feeds into the school's designated data monitoring points, which occur three times a year (and four times for year 7 pupils) and involve the SLT and teachers from across the department. This is to help inform teachers who may not have considered a particular learning need or may be inexperienced.

"It's not just filling in a form; there's a discussion as well."

Parents also complete an admission form during an 'academic counselling day'. On it, they are asked whether they have considered whether their child has a SEN. They will also share information collected on pupils throughout the school year with parents and ask them if they have any concerns about their child's progress.

"What would normally happen is that there would be a meeting with the tutor – a face-to-face meeting – during what we call an academic counselling day where all parents come in on that day, and on that day all the information would be shared with parents and then we'd let parents know that the SEN team are looking at this further and they would be contacted by the SEN team. And sometimes we might decide that there is going to be a referral, sometimes we might decide that they might be put on a SEN school support plan. Everyone signs a statement to say that they know their role and responsibilities in all of this."

### **What constraints impact the school's ability to identify pupils with SEN?**

The main challenge for the school is the timeliness and quality of information they receive from previous educational settings. The school recognises that there is such a range of SEN within each year cohort and it is difficult to establish need quickly for every pupil. Therefore, the information they receive from previous educational settings is paramount to meeting need in a timely fashion.

"The processes are not consistent because there's no legal obligation on any school to provide particular information, but we send a communication to explain that we think it would be helpful for the child to step into the school well. Most schools are cooperative but not all [and that's a challenge for us]."

## Information from previous educational settings

All leaders and teachers reported that their school received information from previous educational settings, and all used this information in the process of providing SEN support to those marked as SEN by the feeder school. Schools also used the information as a resource in the process of identifying a new SEN issue that a previous educational establishment may have missed.

### Timeliness of information

Leaders and teachers generally considered the information they receive from previous educational settings to be given in a timely manner. They felt this was either a result of the good relationship they have with their feeder schools, or the proactive approach they take to understanding their incoming cohort.

“Due to the communication, we have with our preschools, we generally get a good heads-up in terms of time to prepare for the child. Issues are generally not picked up about children at a young age because it's very difficult to distinguish between immaturity and an established barrier to learning but certainly when the information is picked up, it's normally there in good time.” - *Primary leader, East of England*

### Relationship to previous educational setting

Most leaders and teachers reported that their school had a transition process with a previous educational setting. Schools adopted a range of approaches to the transition process, with evidence of each approach in primary and secondary settings. Schools engaged variously in:

- A site visit to the previous educational setting, to meet or observe the child before they arrive;
- An informal conversation (e.g., a phone call) with the previous educational setting to discuss the needs of any child with SEN before they arrive;
- A formal meeting with the leadership of the previous educational setting to discuss the needs of each child with SEN; and
- Disseminating a form for all previous educational settings to complete outlining the needs of their children with SEN.

“There is an electronic form which each school has to complete for their students. Our feeder schools will complete specific data for all of their children coming to us.” - *Primary leader, East of England*

“It might be a 5-minute conversation in a simple case. If the pupil has SEN, then there would be a longer call and we would try (pre-COVID) and do a visit. We'd ask them for assessments and reports and have a detailed conversation.” - *Primary teacher, North West*

### **How information is used**

Most schools review information from previous educational settings with the expectation of delivering support in the same or a similar way – the concept of a ‘seamless transition’ whereby consistent support is delivered was a common theme. Others preferred to wait to see if the pupil needed the support they were receiving at a previous educational setting. This in part reflected a relatively common concern about the quality of information supplied by the previous educational setting.

### **Further information requirements**

Generally, schools were positive about the relevance, depth and usefulness of the information supplied about pupils from their previous education setting, and felt it enabled them to put in place appropriate support for each pupil that might need it.

“On the whole they're [previous educational settings] very honest, they want their kids to transfer successfully, I can't see that there's anything we're missing there.” - *Secondary leader, South East*

“The work is highly collaborative in terms of making sure that all the right information needed is transferred between the school phases. There is no information missing.” - *Secondary leader, London*

In the minority of schools where the information received was not suitable, there was no one clear information gap. Leaders and teachers variously discussed wanting further detail on the specific nature of the need, the child’s behavioural issues, and what approaches had been tried and found to work well, though some reported deliberately hidden information that prevented schools delivering the support the pupil required. There were also instances where information was missing because it simply had not been picked up by the previous school.

"Sometimes if a primary school does have a suspicion of a need, they won't share that with us because they haven't followed it through. And that's when we get them [pupil] and we really have to go back and work out what is going on with this child. And then you'll find out more information [from the primary school] and that is frustrating." - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

## What works well in the process of identifying SEN?

This section looks at the common themes amongst leaders and teachers regarding what they felt works well in their approach to identifying pupils with SEN.

### Strong communication: Internally

Leaders and teachers most commonly reported that the communication between teaching staff and the SEN department was the most positive and important aspect of their approach to identifying SEN. These schools have created an open environment whereby staff will share information freely to alert others of a possible SEN issue.

"That as a team, we will take the time to work to get to know each child, ask one another and seek advice... then get the SENCO in to observe." - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

### Strong communication: Parents

A slightly less common theme was schools' relationship with parents. Encouraging an open dialogue, whereby both schools and parents feel comfortable approaching each other about a SEN concern, was felt to be a key element of these schools' approach to SEN identification.

"We've got a really good rapport with our parents and the community – it allows us to make contact with the pupils initially." - *Secondary teacher, North West*

### High quality training and TA expertise

The quality of SEN identification Continuing Professional Development (CPD) available at the school was often felt to be important. This, coupled with experienced and knowledgeable staff, maximises the chance of early identification of SEN.

"They [teaching staff] are all trained well, especially in reception, to look at children objectively and see whether it's a little personality

quirk or whether it is something quite different about that child." -  
*Primary teacher, South East*

## **Clear identification process**

Another theme was the importance of the identification process being well understood by all staff. In schools where this was working well, the processes were both formalised and regularly discussed with staff, for example with the SENCO explaining the procedures around identification of SEN. In some schools the SENCO reviewed the identification process periodically to check they were working effectively.

## **What could be improved upon in the process of identifying SEN?**

This section looks at what schools felt could be improved in their approach to identifying pupils with SEN. Leaders and teachers reported a range of issues, and the two tables below separate these into barriers (both internal and external) to identification, and improvements with internal processes.

## **Barriers to identification of SEN**

### **Accessing specialists**

One of the most common barriers relating to the identification of SEN was challenges in being able to access specialists in a timely manner due to high demand for their services.

"What we really struggle with is getting the Ed Psych in. It could take 6-12 weeks, if we are lucky and that's where the process then gets flawed." - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

### **Relationship with parents**

Some respondents indicated that occasionally parents were in disagreement with the needs identified for their child, and this made it harder to progress with providing support.

"I think we could have more discussion with parents who are not so accepting of the idea that their child has SEN and as a school we tend to shy away from having those more difficult conversations." -  
*Primary teacher, East of England*

## Quality of data from previous educational setting

Some schools felt that the quality of data they receive from previous educational settings can be variable. This was typically dependent on the 'record keeping' within the previous setting; sometimes detail on need was limited, other times it was non-existent – including instances where the school was and was not aware of a potential SEN issue. This led to delays in pupils receiving the support they need, particularly if their need was less visible.

"It really depends on the school that they came from before, and the teacher...sometimes you will receive absolutely nothing." - *Primary teacher, South East*

## Resourcing within the school

Several schools pinpointed internal resourcing as a key barrier in the process of identifying SEN. For these schools, having more support staff or a larger SEN department would result in needs being met more promptly, particularly when class sizes are large and multiple pupils have complex needs.

"We need more staff. It's much slower when you've got less people in the SEN department... learning support assistants have been cut, and with large class sizes it can make it very challenging to identify need." - *Secondary teacher, East of England*

## Pupil mobility

Some leaders and teachers reported that another barrier to timely identification of need was the mobility of pupils. These (typically urban) schools reported that with particularly complex situations, getting requisite support in place can take time and may not happen before a pupil moves to a different school. Having a historical record of a child's need was vital and not always present.

"There should be a better system for moving children across schools, because I think children do sort of slip through the gaps and then it takes a long time to gather all of the information that you need to get a child a CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) appointment for example. If you are working with another school, then they have a lot of evidence which can support the application." - *Primary teacher, South East*

## Improvements to SEN identification processes

### Staff training and expertise

While schools often felt the training and support available to staff was a positive aspect of their school's approach to identification of SEN, a minority reported that they or their staff would benefit from more of a 'whole school approach' to training. The need for more training was felt to particularly apply to new staff, where leaders and teachers felt initial teacher training could place more emphasis on SEN, and do more to build up the confidence of new teachers in identifying potential SEN.<sup>5</sup> One respondent mentioned specifically that the writing of Support and Achievement Plans (SAPS) needed to be prioritised more when new staff joined so that they know what the schools expectations are with providing SEN support. Some respondents also felt more intensive training for their LSAs would be desirable, so that they can feel more confident supporting pupils receiving SEN support.

"Our internal mechanisms are in place but making sure that when new members of staff join us they know exactly what our expectations are, that's something we could tighten up." - *Secondary leader, South East*

Linked to staff training and expertise in SEN, a handful of leaders and teachers reported that the incorrect identification of SEN is a challenge within their school, and differentiating between a SEN and a behavioural need, a developmental need, and a language need (e.g., ESOL pupils) can be very challenging and may result in the misidentification of SEN.

"We have to be really careful not to step in too soon sometimes as it can just be that the child is very young or just needs to mature." - *Secondary leader, South East*

### Baseline testing

A few schools felt their school's approach to testing for SEN specifically could be more systematic. They felt standardised, nationally available tests designed to identify possible SEN in transitioning pupils would be very beneficial. These schools with less developed testing mechanisms felt this led to slower identification of SEN.

"There is no whole school test in year 7 or 8 but implementation of this would help enormously in identifying those in need. Something a

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<sup>5</sup> This tallies with findings from the Summer 2019 School Snapshot Survey, where 7% of teachers reported that they did not feel equipped to identify pupils who may have a SEN: [School snapshot survey: summer 2019](#)



little more systematic in terms of testing." - *Secondary teacher, East Midlands*

Linked to this, a minority of schools that administered specialist tests reported that these tests were not suitable for younger children as they require skills which younger children may have not fully developed.

"For year 1 children, it's quite frustrating because it's quite hard to test a child so young. Some of the tests, I look at and think 'that's not going to assess their SEN', and the fact that they can't access that test is because of their age." - *Primary teacher, West Midlands*

## Chapter 3: Meeting the needs of pupils with SEN

This chapter covers the provision and SEN support typically offered in schools, including:

- The most common provisions offered to pupils receiving SEN support;
- The typical roles of key groups (e.g., teachers, TAs and SENCOs) in the delivery of SEN support;
- How and what information is shared regarding SEN support, and who it is shared with; and
- The successes and challenges associated with meeting the needs of pupils with SEN.

### Provisions offered to pupils receiving SEN support

SEN support provision tended to fall into two categories:

- Provision that related to specialist equipment designed for specific needs. This included a range of items, such as software to improve reading or numeracy skills, pencil grips and weighted mats to help with sensory difficulties, wheelchairs, raised ramps, sloping boards, and coloured paper.
- Provision that related to supporting or developing pupils' emotional, social, physical and mental wellbeing through interventions, workshops and additional teaching assistance.

The following section predominantly discusses the second of these, as these were most commonly discussed by respondents.

### Quality First Teaching

Most leaders and teachers felt that key to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN was to adopt an inclusive and engaging approach to teaching. This approach, referred to as Quality First Teaching, was highlighted by many, with its central aim of using specific teaching techniques that cater for a range of abilities and needs.

This technique begins with how the teacher and TA communicate with the pupil. Teachers described techniques such as lowering their tone of voice (i.e., low and slow), using short key words and phrases which helps pupils with short retentive memory, visual timetables each day and specified seating arrangements. These, they considered, were minor but impactful techniques which do not disrupt the objectives of the lesson but rather engender an environment that works for all.

“My school has a mantra whereby we say, ‘what works for SEN works for all’.” - *Secondary teacher, West Midlands*

Teachers reported that planning lessons that adopt these inclusive techniques was challenging, particularly for large class sizes. Teachers in larger secondary schools, especially, expressed the difficulty finding time to plan captivating and inclusive lessons.

## **Interventions and in-class support**

Another common facet of schools’ provision of SEN support was the use of intervention courses and in-class support, often delivered by TAs. Intervention courses, typically six weeks, were short-term focused programmes which focus on developing specific skills.

A range of interventions were reported by leaders and teachers, including:

- Reading interventions (Lexia Learning, Accelerated reading);
- GCSE additional support;
- Dyslexia support;
- International Dyslexia Learning (IDL) Literacy (to support reading and writing);
- Social interventions (i.e., how to make friends);
- Level-up literacy programme;
- Lego Therapy (lesson of learning to lead and follow);
- Phonics;
- Building motor skills; and
- ‘Calming space’ (safe space outside of classroom).

Although typically carried out by TAs or LSAs, there were instances in some primary schools whereby interventions were led by the teacher, SEN specialist or headteacher. This was a rare exception but meant that the dialogue around specific needs could be better explored and informed by senior members of staff. This was felt to be beneficial for reviewing whether needs had been met.

## Use of SEN specialists

### External specialists

Leaders and teachers reported that SEN specialists such as Educational Psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists played a substantial role in meeting SEN needs. Specialists, who are predominantly from external agencies, were utilised in all stages of provision: working individually with pupils to refine suitable provisions, developing pupils' objectives in their IEPs, providing feedback and guidance to SENCOs, and conducting check-in observations for teachers.

Although some specialists get involved in the delivery of specific interventions, this was not common. Specialists tended to support the school staff who delivered provision to the pupil with SEN support.

Access to external specialists was a substantial barrier for many schools. Schools reported that due to high demand, there were long waiting lists for SEN specialists. As a result, pupils with an EHCP were prioritised, both by the schools themselves (in seeking external support) as well as by SEN specialists. Where access to SEN specialists was limited, schools typically implemented SEN support with the resources they had available while they waited for involvement of specialists.

"Other teams can take such a long time to come that you have your own strategies in place first. You get to know the advice that they give you, and try to put this in place before they arrive." - *Primary leader, East Midlands*

### Internal specialists

In the minority of schools where budget was available, schools had trained their TAs in specialist SEN provisions and interventions, enabling them to deliver SEN support internally. Where this was possible, it was a crucial aspect of their SEN provision as it meant schools were less reliant on accessing external SEN specialists for advice and support.

## Documents to aid the delivery of SEN support

Once a pupil has been identified as requiring SEN support, leaders and teachers commonly reported the use of specific documents laying out needs and objectives. Writing of these documents was led by the SENCO, supported with additional information and guidance from teachers, TAs, SEN specialists and occasionally parents. Leaders and teachers emphasised the usefulness of documents which set out the additional needs, objectives, and provisions in place. Such documents were used by all groups to

gain a quick overview of the pupil. These documents came in a variety of forms, and the purpose and content of them differed. These included:

- **Individual Education Plans (IEP):** this document sets out all SEN related information about the pupil (e.g., the provisions that have been put in place, individual targets for the pupil, necessary resources, and the success criteria of interventions). This document was shared with parents and checked or evaluated regularly depending on the school's evaluation processes.
- **Provision maps:** this document shows the pupil's provisions mapped out in the classroom and school as a whole. This document was most commonly used by teachers as a reference document, enabling them to quickly determine the provisions required for each child in their class.
- **Pupil Passports:** this document summarises the preferences, learning styles and concerns for each pupil. It also provides a snapshot of needs and provision. Pupils were typically involved in creating this document.

Regardless of which document was used, the vast majority of schools had one in place, laying out pupils needs and objectives. These documents were beneficial for a number of reasons, including saving time for teachers and TAs in terms of preparing and delivering their classes. It also ensured that information about pupils with SEN was stored in one place and easily accessible.

## Roles in the process of delivering SEN support

As alluded to in the analysis above, four main groups were involved in delivering SEN support. The vast majority of schools reported that all of these groups were involved in delivery. These were:

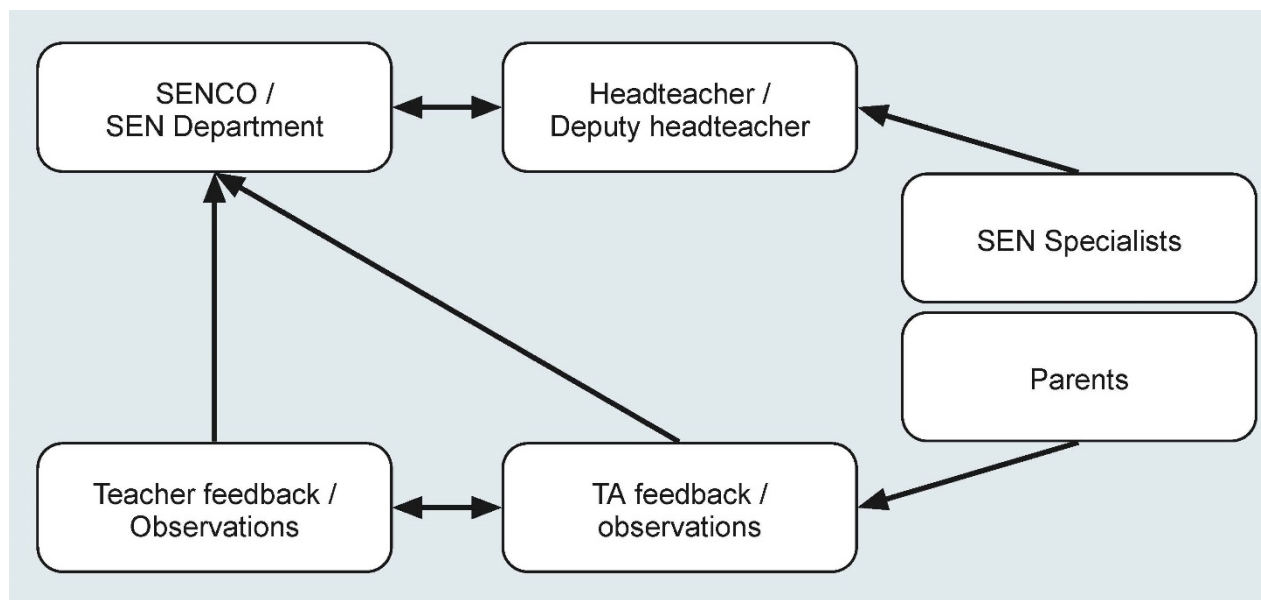
- The SENCO;
- Teaching staff;
- TAs and LSAs; and
- SEN specialists.

Other groups, such as parents, were involved to a lesser extent.

Figure 2 shows how each group interacts in the SEN support delivery network. Leaders and teachers consistently reflected that not all groups had an equal amount of influence in the decision-making process. They did agree, however, that each played an important part of the collaborative approach schools take to SEN support delivery.

The figure demarcates the internal team (e.g., headteacher/deputy, SENCO/SEN department, Teacher and TAs/LSAs) from external groups (e.g., SEN specialists and parents).

**Figure 2: Typical role of each group in the delivery of SEN support provisions**



## SENCO

Most leaders and teachers described the school SENCO as having the most significant role in the decision-making process around SEN support provision. The SENCO's role tended to be divided into action-based tasks and managerial responsibilities.

However, the level of direct engagement SENCOs had with class teachers, TAs and pupils varied considerably by school phase. In primary schools, although they tended to work in the background, school staff (both teaching and support) were afforded greater opportunity to communicate with the SENCO about their concerns or observations.

By contrast, secondary teachers knew the SENCO and their SEN team, but were considerably less likely to communicate with them directly. If there was a problem with specific provisions, the SENCO typically communicated with the headteacher or TA rather than the teacher. The SENCO used email alerts to notify teachers of specific needs or changes to provisions that they needed to be aware of. Communication between the SEN team and teachers was less consistent in secondary schools.

Although the SENCO played a significant role in secondary schools and engaged with teachers during CPD relating to SEN, there was less focus on building a direct relationship between the teacher and SENCO.

## **The relationship between teachers and TAs**

The classroom teacher and TAs played an equal role in the delivery of SEN support. TAs, who report to the class teacher and SENCO, were crucial in the delivery of SEN support and therefore often had the most in-depth, personalised knowledge and understanding of pupils receiving SEN support.

Leaders and teachers often reported that their TA's observations were useful for the teacher who tended to spend less time working directly with pupils receiving SEN support. This was more commonly reported in secondary schools where teachers were not teaching the same pupils with SEN for each lesson. In these instances, TAs and LSAs were expected to update pupil profiles, share progress with teachers and report back to the SENCO regarding insights or issues.

## **SEN specialists**

Most schools reported that external SEN specialists were involved in the diagnosing and provision implementation processes. Although the extent to which they were involved varied (mostly dependent on availability), they played a pivotal role in ensuring that suitable provisions were put in place. They provided crucial, expert advice to the school SENCO and SEN team about how to best approach delivery with certain pupils, as well as determining strategies for developing pupils in the long term.

## **Parents**

Leaders and teachers reported that parents had an important role to play in the process of identifying and meeting needs. Their role centred on engagement with the school SENCO regarding the progress of their child. They influenced the school by observing their child at home and offering insight and feedback to the school.

They also played a significant role in agreeing to or amending provisions. A minority of leaders and teachers also reported dedicated sessions their school had organised for parents to speak to teachers and other parents with children receiving SEN support. In addition, provision maps and IEPs were shared with parents and specific objectives were put in place in the IEPs for parents to work on with their child at home.

Involvement of parents varied considerably across schools, especially within secondary schools. In secondary schools, provisions were led by the SEN department and discussed with the pupil rather than the parents. Parental involvement, this would suggest, depended on school phase of the pupil. Primary-age children received significant input and involvement from parents, especially where their additional needs were newly identified, whereas for older pupils in secondary schools the relationship was more often between the SEN team and the pupil.

## Variation in the influence of groups on decision-making

The emphasis and level of responsibility held for each group varied amongst schools – particularly between primary and secondary schools where, for the latter, teachers are less heavily involved with each pupil. Despite these differences, at an overall level, the SENCO had the most significant role and sat alongside the Headteacher who, on the whole, would make the final decision on SEN support provisions.

## Sharing information gathered on SEN support

### Format/content of information

The most common formats for sharing information on SEN support were:

- The ILP or pupil passport; and
- The annual or termly SEN plan.

The ILP or pupil passport held information about the targets set, interventions used, and progress made for each pupil on SEN support. SEN plans were delivered to the governing body, and typically used overall data about a school cohort, rather than specific to an individual pupil; the focus of this was reviewing outcomes and providing examples of best practice.

Information that was shared less often and less widely, included:

- Pen portraits of pupils;
- Barriers to providing adequate support (i.e., some evidence of schools reflecting on their practice); and
- Positive case studies.

### How information is shared

Information was shared through a range of channels, reflecting the diversity of ways in which schools record SEN support. These included:

- Meetings (including general staff meetings, SLT meeting, round-table meetings with all staff relevant to the individual pupil/s);
- Via written reports (produced by school leaders/SENCO);
- Via email (bulletin);
- Verbally (on one-to-one basis with teachers);



- Through documents saved on a shared drive (e.g., google docs or one drive); and
- Via management information systems, where they exist e.g., SIMS.

There were notable differences between schools that share information verbally (at a meeting) and those that share information electronically (the file is emailed or made accessible via a shared drive). Those sharing information verbally typically involved a wider range of stakeholders (e.g., parents, the SLT, other teachers and specialists) in the conversation to get a 'full sense' of the pupil's needs and strategies. Others kept information to a restricted group within the school, sometimes citing GDPR or other privacy related concerns as a reason for doing so:

“We gather data electronically on a secure part of our server. Myself, the Head, and the Deputy (SENCO) and my new ARP [Autism Resource Provision] team and the Senior Leadership Team in the mainstream school are the only people who have access to that information. If a class teacher had one of those pupils in their class and needed the information shared, then I would share that with them privately.” - *Primary teacher, South East*

## Who information is shared with

As highlighted in the previous section, most schools regard parents as having a key role in the support given to pupils with SEN. As such, schools reported that they shared information with parents in the form of an ILP, or pupil passport termly or during interventions. For most schools, sharing information with the parents was standard practice.

Governors were also frequently mentioned in this context, and teachers described how an annual or termly report on SEN provision was shared with the governing body. In most cases, this provided data from management information systems, information on targets and strategies for the forthcoming term or academic year, rather than sharing details on individual cases.

Very few schools appear to share information about SEN support with wider staff within the school. Where this was common practice, it was either in the form of the weekly staff update, a staff meeting or briefing note – which would focus on overall issues, rather than individual cases. Typically, information gathered on SEN support was only shared with the SLT, and those teachers or support assistants who work directly with pupils with SEN, due to GDPR or other privacy issues.

“For staff it is on a need-to-know basis, due to sensitivity.” -  
*Secondary leader, Yorkshire and Humber*

As noted above, while schools frequently offered pupils the opportunity to discuss their support at termly parent evenings, very few involved them further. The minority of schools that did share information on SEN support with the pupil did so through their Pupil Passport or learning plan. These documents contained information on their targets, progression and interventions put in place.

The research gathered very little evidence of information being shared with outside agencies, such as the local authority/social worker unless there was a specific request or issue e.g., a situation which requires Child Protection to get involved.

## **Sharing information with other education settings**

There were clear differences by school phase in relation to information sharing between education settings.

Almost all primary schools were actively sharing information on SEN support at the point at which a pupil makes the transition to another primary school, or from infant to junior school, or when they move on to secondary school. Information shared was typically in the form of an individual file for each pupil; either a paper, electronic file or shared via software (e.g., CPOMS).

From the descriptions given, primary schools were clearly committed to sharing as much relevant information with the transition school as possible, collating in the file's medical information, learning plans, and progress trackers.

"Our SENCO goes through each file herself to ensure all information is in the files: provision maps, details of SEND and all data we hold onto for a child. We hand deliver or send these files by registered post." - *Primary leader, South East*

Some primary schools went further and met with the SENCO or class teacher from the transition school to discuss individual pupils support needs.

"The secondary school would come and have meetings with us in person and they would do a really subtle observation of the child just to see their school environment. We would share information with them electronically." - *Primary teacher, South East*

Local SENCO partnerships were also used to share information, and were valued, pre-COVID-19, for the opportunity to speak face-to-face with colleagues from the transition school.

The only concerns raised by primary schools about sharing SEN support information was in regard to privacy issues, and the method which they communicate; with some who use bespoke data management systems, or word/ paper files, finding the task time consuming as it was harder to share pupil files electronically.

Information sharing for the transition from secondary to a post-16 setting did not appear to be as rigorous as the primary to secondary transition; around half of the secondary leaders interviewed were aware of a system existing within their school which enabled the sharing of information at the point of transition (to another secondary school or post-16 education provider), compared with this being universal for those interviewed in relation to the transfer from primary to secondary education.

Where data was shared, most schools produced a file for each pupil containing information on attendance, support needs, strategies used, timeline of support information. In some cases, a feedback questionnaire was included if the transition school or college required additional information.

A few secondary schools went “the extra mile”, with the SENCO or tutor visiting the post-16 setting to outline what support had been most successful, what the pupil’s needs were, and level of engagement the school had received from the pupil’s parents. Others benefited from being part of a borough wide SENCO group which provided a forum for sharing information.

“We share through the Transition Group (borough-wide process) ... if students leave us at 16 and go on to college.” - *Secondary leader, London*

School leaders stressed the importance of sharing SEN support information at the point of transition, to ensure that the correct support is in place for both the next setting and the pupil.

“If you don't share information, they'll have to spend another year or two having to find out for themselves, which will hinder the student's progress.” - *Secondary teacher, London*

“If they leave our school, we always share everything that we have on file, otherwise you send the child on to fail before they have even started.” - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

## **What works well in the process of meeting the needs of pupils with SEN?**

The grids below highlight what leaders and teachers felt was working well within their schools in relation to the provision of SEN support. Respondents were encouraged to think about what sets their school apart. Among both teachers and leaders there was general consensus around what works well with little differentiation between the two groups.

### **Having a strong SENCO / SEN team**

Leaders and teachers indicated the importance of the effectiveness and leadership of the SENCO, or, predominantly in secondary schools, the SEN team and their ability to lead SEN processes such as report writing, provision making, writing IEPs and liaising with external groups (parents and specialists). Many leaders and teachers expressed the value of being able to turn to the school SENCO for guidance and feedback, for example if teachers had concerns about specific pupils.

### **Specialist contribution**

Where additional specialist support is available, respondents emphasised the value and clarity of having a SEN specialist involved in the delivery of SEN provision. SEN specialist input was a vital feedback mechanism for teachers and leaders, and for the validation of specific needs that have been identified.

### **Informal communication**

Teachers and leaders, predominantly from smaller schools, stressed the importance of informal conversation between teaching staff for gaining advice, flagging concerns and monitoring pupils. These conversations took place in the staff room or outside of the classroom and were more frequent and casual than planned and structured meetings. Similarly, respondents described situations whereby they would discuss a pupil informally with the SENCO. There was less evidence of this style of communication in larger (predominantly secondary) schools, meaning vital information about pupils receiving SEN support is less easily transferred across the school.

### **Consistent approach**

Having consistent systems and processes in place to meet needs was also critical for the successful delivery of SEN support. For example, schools reported that having the same TA for each lesson gave pupils personalised and consistent assistance. This was more common in primary schools where teachers teach the same pupils each day.

## **What could be improved upon and how?**

The following grid focuses on the aspects of meeting the needs of pupils on SEN support that leaders and teachers felt impacted their ability to deliver provision effectively. In our analysis, we have differentiated between overarching barriers which are more fixed, and the key improvements that can be made by schools.

### **Barriers to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN**

#### **Lack of funding**

Leaders reported that lack of funding had a direct impact on the number of TAs available to support pupils receiving SEN support and the level of investment in SEN provisions, including intervention programmes, software, specialised equipment etc.

#### **Lack of TA availability**

Teachers cited lack of TA availability as being a result of a lack of funding. Where teachers reported that their school had made cuts to their budget, TAs tended to be an area of provision that was cut. This placed greater responsibility on the class teacher to deliver SEN support and meant fewer staff were available to deliver interventions and one-to-one support.

#### **SEN specialist availability**

When schools were unsure of the best way to move forward and required specialist assistance to make decisions about necessary provisions to use, leaders reported that a lack of specialist availability slowed the process down. In these instances, delivery of SEN support provision was delayed.

Specialists were crucial in supporting teachers, by observing the teacher as well as specific children and offering advice or guidance of how best to support pupils with SEN and develop a more inclusive teaching approach. Where they were not available, teachers reflected that the quality of SEN support in the classroom suffered.

#### **EHCP as a priority**

Leaders and teachers commonly reported that due to more funding being available for pupils with an EHCP, comprehensive support was guaranteed for these pupils and there was a risk provision for pupils receiving SEN support was lost.

#### **Time**

Dedicating adequate time to planning inclusive lessons and checking in on pupils on SEN support was another key barrier for teachers. This was particularly strong in secondary

schools where class sizes were larger and level of need differed substantially between classes.

### **Engagement of parents**

Parents can sometimes struggle with the concept that their child will have a label, and getting them to be a part of the SEN discussion can be a challenge.

### **Improvements to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN**

#### **Having a consistent school handover process throughout all stages of schooling**

Leaders reported that, where this was done well, it made a massive difference on the development and wellbeing of the pupil. However, where information was not shared consistently, meant the current school had to 'pick up the pieces', therefore delaying pupils' access to SEN provisions.

#### **Balance between SEN and non-SEN**

For some teachers, getting the balance right between attention to SEN needs but also nurturing the needs of pupils not on the SEN register was a challenge. This was typically considered to be a training issue where advanced modules on supporting pupils of different ability levels would be beneficial.

#### **Communication**

Ensuring regular and consistent communication with parents, to keep them included in the discussion and facilitate insights and feedback from their perspective.

## Chapter 4: Reviewing support for pupils with SEN

One of the objectives of this study was to explore whether there was a systematic approach to reviewing and evaluating SEN support in schools and to understand what the key markers of success were.

This chapter outlines how schools monitored the quality and effectiveness of the support they provide to pupils with SEN, considering:

- Which groups were involved; and
- What resources were used.

It also highlights what worked well and what could be improved upon in the process.

### Monitoring of SEN support in schools

Most, but not all, schools had a process in place to monitor the quality and effectiveness of their SEN support with used this consistently across the school for all pupils with SEN.

There were three overarching methods used to monitor SEN support in schools, shown here in order of prevalence across the schools interviewed. Most leaders and teachers reported that their school adopted more than one. Schools variously had a:

- Dedicated tracking system for pupils with SEN in place: gathering data from teachers, TA, the SENCO and members of the SLT;
- Tracking system used to monitor support via specific targets for pupils with SEN, within a wider 'whole-school' approach to tracking pupil's progress; and
- Ad-hoc approach based on informal feedback following teacher-led assessment.

There were no consistent differences by school phase in the approaches adopted to monitor support provided to pupils with SEN.

As explored below, there were a number of themes linked to these overarching methods, including intervention tracking and periodic reviews of pupil progress.

### Teacher input in tracking systems

Teachers had a crucial role in evaluating the success of support given to pupils receiving SEN support. In some schools, monitoring was the sole responsibility of class teachers, although sometimes this happened in partnership with TAs. In these schools, teachers

were tasked with evaluating their own teaching methods and reviewing progress against individual pupil plans.

“There is a lot of self-evaluation of the teaching assistants. I’m not sure what else they have to measure the effectiveness apart from self-evaluation or interviews if they do any progress reviews with the pupils.” - *Secondary teacher, London*

In most schools, all teaching staff, including TAs, working with a pupil with SEN were involved in the process of updating tracking records to identify support strategies used, assessments taken, and the strengths and weaknesses of each. They were also given the responsibility to identify any concerns they had about the suitability of each approach. These were then shared with specialists (including the school’s SENCO), or a member of the SLT to assess whether the provision had been successful.

“We need to know what is and what isn’t working for that child and why. It’s part of our everyday process to enter and check this information.” - *Primary teacher, North West*

“Teachers are constantly assessing the children on the appropriate special needs scales to see whether they are moving their way up. For children with SEN it is slow, and the steps are very small, but they should still be moving along that scale.” - *Primary teacher, London*

In a handful of instances, teachers were required to complete a matrix or grid to monitor pupil progress in terms of the efficacy of different approaches. In some cases, the grid included a rating scale to help understand what is and is not working.

“Progress checks are reported to the SLT, SENCO and parents 3-4 times per year, by teachers. Specific to SEN there is additional info on these reports that outlines the support provided to each student e.g., keywords, seating plan change, and a rating of 1-3 on effectiveness of this support. Scale is No change/ok/need to try something different.” - *Secondary teacher, East Midlands*

## **Intervention tracking**

One of the most common elements of a school’s tracking system was via data collected at the start and end point of interventions. Interventions typically lasted around six weeks and during that time schools who used this approach tracked the support pupils were receiving and the progress made; they occasionally met to discuss the intervention;



measure the impact; or take a different route if the intervention is not a 'good fit' for the pupil.

"We need to know what is and what isn't working for that child and why. It's part of our everyday process to enter and check this information." - *Primary teacher, North West*

## **SENCO and teacher-led observation**

SENCO or teacher-led observation were common tools used in reviewing SEN support and were used to assess how interventions were working in practice and whether they were meeting the pupil's needs, how teachers were delivering the interventions, and to verify findings from the intervention tracking data. In some cases, the headteacher was also present and the focus of observation in these cases was typically Newly Qualified Teacher's (NQT) or support assistants.

"The school observes teachers ... every time we go into a lesson, every time we look at the books of that student, we'll always have that element of SEN, always looking at that to ensure that provision. It's an ongoing system." - *Secondary leader, North West*

"They observe teachers, observe the learning in the classroom, conduct 'book looks' and plot the progress of the children through assessments. The SENCO is also checking in with pupils with SEN in lessons, watches the teaching, monitors the use of the additional adults in the class." - *Primary leader, East of England*

"Then they will be looking at the resources that we are using and how we are presenting information, do we know where the SEN kids are sitting in our classroom, that kind of thing." - *Secondary teacher, South East*

SENCO learning walks were commonly used as part of pupil observations, or to prepare for more formal observations. They were less formal, shorter, and frequently focused on the whole class. The SENCO used 'book looks' as part of the learning walks to review the work of pupils with SEN. The overall aim was to ensure that inclusive practices were in use and that the correct 'behaviour and relationships model' had been adopted, in order to identify training needs or to prepare teachers for more formal observations. In most schools, the SENCO undertook the learning walks but in others it would be led by a member of the SLT.

## Periodic (formal and informal) reviews

Outside of specific intervention tracking and SENCO assessments, pupil progress was analysed (either termly – typically more formal – or half-termly) using data sources available for all pupils, such as behaviour points, attendance reports, and assessment scores. In the minority of schools who indicated that they used this broader approach, these sources were referenced in SENCO meetings with classroom teachers or fed into SENCO reports. These were considered easy to implement as they occurred at the same time as typical ‘data drops’.

“If a pupil has an emotional or behavioural need, progress measures will include looking at things like improvements in social interactions, engagement levels etc, as well as academic data.” - *Secondary teacher, London*

Formal review processes were often supplemented with informal feedback from teachers, frequently gathered via ‘Round Robin’ email requests, asking for feedback either on their work (individual pieces of class-based work or homework, etc.) or their wellbeing or behaviour. This element of monitoring helped to identify individual class-based issues, which need addressing quickly, for instance, if a child with a visual impairment is seated too far from the teacher, but also allow for continuous evaluation of interventions and the setting of soft targets set by teachers/SENCO.

In some schools, the review process was a continuous evaluation of student’s progress, undertaken by the teacher, or designed to take place before and after each intervention.

“Regularly checked to identify how pupil is progressing/working with their targets outlined in [pupil] passports. Kept up-to date regularly, every six weeks.” - *Secondary teacher, North West*

Other schools had a tiered approach, whereby daily teacher observations about pupil progress and behaviour fed into periodic reviews of behaviour, attendance, and assessment scores annual reviews. These, in turn, were supplemented by more formal annual reviews with a pupil and their parent/carer by a wider group (SENCO and learning mentors).

“Classroom teachers are constantly looking at and marking work, as well as observing behaviour, engagement etc. 'It never stops, there is constant assessment by the teachers.’” - *Secondary teacher, London*

## Frequency of reviews

The frequency of reviews varied considerably, reflecting the different approaches adopted by schools in their evaluation of support for pupils with SEN.

Reviews were most commonly conducted on a termly basis, in line with parent evenings/meetings or progress reviews for all pupils. The aim of these was to review provision and assess whether any changes were needed, either escalating support, reducing support, or changing existing support.

"Termly reports with data basically because you need the numbers {to monitor}". - *Primary teacher, North West*

"Every term, pupil passports are reviewed, and they will assess whether the provision has been successful or not. All applicable staff and TAs are involved in this process of updating the records and tracking the pupil's progress. These reports will be sent to SENCO she will review the children with EHCPs and then all other children with SEN needs." - *Primary teacher, East of England*

A small number of schools conducted an annual review in addition to intervention tracking and observation; the impetus being appraisals, the governors annual report and/or a need to set targets for the next academic year.

"Yearly audit delivered to SLT, looking at support and outcomes for each child...this helps to set what we are going to do next year." - *Secondary leader, South East*

There were differences in approach by school phase. Some primary schools highlighted how they had adopted half-termly review processes both to reflect the length of interventions; and to support NQTs, for example to flag up areas of concern in regard to teaching styles, in a timely manner.

A few secondary schools had no set review timetable in place. This was typically in cases where the review was the responsibility of individual teachers, rather than overseen by the SENCO or SLT. Others highlighted that a review process was in place for pupils with an EHCP but was less systematic for pupils with SEN support. Teachers were aware of being asked for data that would feed into reviews, but the requests were judged to be ad-hoc in nature.

"From time to time, we are asked to complete an audit. The SENCO will send out an audit or questionnaire asking about various aspects of how we support, what is in place within the classroom, etc. I don't

think we have been observed by the SENCO to see how we are dealing with things. It's more part of the overall processes of observing the quality of teaching." - *Secondary teacher, North West*

## Small secondary school in London with a multi-stranded SEN support review process

### Overarching process to reviewing SEN

The school has a multi-stranded approach to monitoring the quality and effectiveness of the support they provide to pupils with SEN. It comes in three forms:

- Daily observation: this strand of review is carried out by classroom teachers. They regularly review and mark work delivered by pupils with SEN. They also observe the behaviour and engagement of these pupils in the classroom. These observations are fed back to the SENCO.
- Periodic reviews: pupils with SEN have an assigned learning mentor. The learning mentor will meet with the SENCO every fortnight to analyse the data they have collected around a pupil's behaviour, attendance, and assessment scores to see if progress is being made.
- Annual reviews: at the end of each year, a more formal meeting is convened, involving the SENCO, teachers and learning mentors of a pupil with SEN. The purpose of the meeting is to share progress with the pupil and their parents.

Data sharing is a key part of their school's ethos when it comes to reviewing SEN support. They share information widely, on SIMS (for attendance, punctuality and learning attitudes) as well as class charts to track data on behaviour management.

"It [the data they collect] is shared with everybody - parents, students, teachers, learning mentors – anybody who has a role to play in the progress of that pupil."

The type of data the school collects and analyses is dependent on the type of SEN the pupil has. If the pupil has an additional emotional or behavioural need, the school will look at different aspects of the pupil's school life, including improvement in social interactions and engagement in the classroom setting.

### What does success look like for this school?

Success for the school is not dependent on a pupil having their SEN support removed. Rather, the focus is on improvement, over an agreed time period, whether that be exam results or behaviour targets (such as a pupil not being excluded from school).

### What challenges does the school face in reviewing SEN support?

The school reported they would like to have one system that captures all data they collect around SEN support. This would make the reviewing process much simpler, but at the moment they use electronic systems, classroom-based paper systems (e.g., behaviour charts) and verbal feedback (from teachers and learning mentors).

"We don't have time to be doing assessments and analysis all the time. If we had some AI giving us information in real time [that would be helpful]. The lag between the data becoming available and it being analysed is where we lose [out]." -  
*Secondary teacher, London*

## Groups involved in the review/evaluation process

### SENCO

In almost all cases, the SENCO was regarded as having the most significant role in reviewing and evaluating the support offered to pupils with SEN.

“As a prime decision maker, they play a very significant role.” -  
*Secondary teacher, East Midlands*

The main facet of the SENCO’s role was to hold all parties (teachers, school leaders, the wider SEN department) accountable, progress the review process, and ensure that teachers and TAs followed the correct processes.

While the SENCO was typically responsible for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of support, decision making about provision (specifically when it has budget considerations) was made either with or by the SLT and/or the school governing body, using feedback collated by the SENCO.

This feedback was taken from meetings with the TA or LSA working with the pupil to discuss the interventions and evaluate their success, alongside conversations with the class teacher.

### Teachers, TAs and LSAs

Teachers and assistants (either TAs or LSAs) were mentioned by most leaders and teachers as playing a significant role in the process of evaluation. Their involvement was typically dependent on how significant they had been in the day-to-day delivery of the support and their experience with pupils with SEN.

Overall, the role of the TA/LSA or teacher in the review of support was regarded as crucial as they had the closest relationship with the pupil and frequently worked with the same pupil throughout their time at the school. Teachers were also considered to be the key link between home and school, a vital part of the overall picture of a pupil’s progress in relation to SEN support.

“We [classroom teachers] will speak to the TAs and LSAs when we are writing the reports and looking at the next steps on the progression framework. We gather the evidence together as a team and we go to the SENCO with our findings.” - *Primary teacher, South East*

## SEN specialists

In contrast, the role that SEN specialists (such as EPs and SaLTs) played was typically limited to an advisory role on strategy and target setting. Some schools invited SEN specialists in at the start of the process, for a new pupil or after the specific characteristics of their need was identified. A minority of schools involved SEN specialists on a termly basis to review the advice and support provided and ask them what next steps they would suggest. Very few respondents acknowledged that specialists had a role in reviewing the support put in place:

“The support we provide is assessed by the speech and language therapist or the Educational Psychologist when they come back each term. They can assess whether the speech and language has been successful and whether programmes have been successful because of the improvements the child will have made since their last visit. The specialists come in once every term or twice a year.” - *Primary teacher, South East*

## Parents

Most schools engaged with parents/carers of pupils with SEN in reviewing and evaluating the support provided. The primary motivation for this was to ensure that the support being offered at home mirrored the support at school, meaning schools and parents were working towards the same outcome.

Nevertheless, parental involvement varied considerably. At the most basic level, it entailed ensuring parents are informed of the provision that has been put in place. This was typically conveyed through a termly meeting (in some cases at parent / teacher evenings) at which schools shared the pupil’s learning plan or pupil passport.

“Occasionally they may question why a certain strategy is being used or the theory behind a strategy. We don't really have parents telling us what to do or challenging what has been done, it's often about educating them as to why a certain strategy has been used.” - *Primary leader, South East*

More commonly, schools described a more participatory approach. They informed parents of progress about their child’s SEN support but also actively gathered feedback from parents. Schools highlighted how they offered both formal and informal channels for feedback:

- **The formal route:** structured conversations every term with parents and teachers, sharing targets and information on the support being used. Parents were provided

with a feedback mechanism, such as a checklist or questionnaire which accompanies a report or personalised learning plan. This gave parents a significant role in checking, commenting, and signing off support plans.

- **The informal route:** schools ensured that informal channels of communication were available to parents throughout the academic year. This was achieved through telephone conversations with parents, or quick catch-ups in the playground.

“Parents are very much involved ... we work in partnership with them ... they are always aware of what their child's needs are and what we have put in place to support them.” - *Secondary teacher, London*

Some schools, typically primaries, used an even more involved approach. Parents in these schools were actively involved in setting progress targets for their child as part of the termly review of the IEP, ILP or Pupil Passport. In these cases, schools highlighted the significant role played by parents, specifically if issues had arisen at home or the learning plan has not had the desired effect on the pupil's progress.

“They contribute to the IEP and they are in touch via phone, are involved with meetings. Normally they're pleased with progress and the support that's been offered. Occasionally they want further support, also on occasion the needs of the children change as they grow older, so they find that they behave well at school but no so well at home.” - *Primary leader, North West*

## Pupils

Examples of pupils input were infrequent, and they were rarely seen as an integral part of the review or evaluation process. While schools frequently offered pupils the opportunity to discuss their support at termly parent evenings, very few involved them further.

“If the kid is getting annoyed so that they are not able to access the lesson in the way that they wanted to and that sort of thing, then we would have that discussion but I'm not aware that we are proactively going round and asking them 'how is your SEN provision going?'" - *Secondary teacher, South East*

There were some examples of schools offering pupils the possibility of sharing views on their support. This included pupils reviewing their learning/support plan or a 'pupil voice' platform. Some schools offered a one-to-one review for the pupil with the SENCO, LSAs or SEN assistants. Active pupil involvement was more likely to be referenced by academies than non-academies.



“The student is involved in the creation of the passport page. They will have a meeting with the SENCO or a member of her team. They will be involved in talking about what they [student] finds challenging or difficult and what things they feel can help them.” - *Secondary teacher, North West*

Very few schools had created a formal mechanism specific to pupils on SEN support whereby they were involved in the evaluation of their support e.g., feedback surveys.

## **What resources are used to monitor the support in place**

Schools used a wide range of methods to record and track the implementation of SEN support. While many used ‘whole-school’ IT systems, such as SIMS, some had devised their own internal systems using Microsoft Excel or Word. Other schools had instead adopted SEN-specific, or behavioural monitoring packages recommended by the local authority, their trust or other schools.

### **Whole-school monitoring systems**

As noted at the start of this section, information on SEN support was gathered at different points in the academic year. This data occasionally fed into impact reports produced by SENCOs, but more commonly was recorded by teachers in ‘My Support Plan’, an IEP, pupil/ student passports or, in primary schools, an Individual Reading Plan (IRP).

SIMS was the most frequently mentioned means of recording support offered to pupils with SEN. In secondary schools, this was typically used alongside other IT packages. A small number of schools used it to directly monitor provision for pupils with SEN, including the associated costs and final outcomes, or to allow teachers to record and access Pupil Passport information. Some highlighted the benefit of being able to share data with other schools who use SIMS.

Other schools also used another IT software package, sometimes in addition to SIMS. This included Power BI, Edulink One, Bromcom, INTEGRIS, ScholarPack, Progresso, Arbor and Go 4 Schools. These were not necessary SEN-specific packages but were used for SEN support reviewing and evaluation.

### **SEN-specific monitoring systems**

The most common SEN-specific package mentioned was Provision Mapping, in addition to other Edukey products such as Class Charts and School Robins, alongside CPOMS and B Squared. Trackers used to monitor progress, whether for the whole school or just pupils with SEN, included Insight, Target Tracker, Lexia Learning and WellComm data. In

addition, specific packages were mentioned in regard to logging teacher observations or learning walks for CPD purposes (e.g., Sisra) and for future career sessions with older pupils with SEN (e.g., Compass Plus).

## **In-house monitoring system**

Most schools also had their own systems for recording the implementation of SEN support, usually in conjunction with other software. Some teachers interviewed, typically from primary schools, were not aware of any other system being used to record SEN support aside from that devised in-house.

Where schools had devised their own system for logging SEN support, they commonly used Excel spreadsheets to record lesson visits or book looks, interviews with pupils, progress trackers and/or intervention trackers. A small number of schools used word documents to detail SEN support, including the IEP or ILP, or to gather information e.g., round robins. Paper-based notes, held by TA or teachers, continue to be one source of information on the support given to pupils receiving SEN support (e.g., observations) but are used in conjunction with other forms of record-keeping.

A couple of teachers urged caution in using only IT to record SEN support; highlighting how a child's progress can change quickly, and emphasising the importance of incorporating a qualitative element, particularly observation and obtaining a 360-degree view from all those involved (including the pupil) or 'round table' meetings with all teaching staff involved:

"You put data in about that child, and within a week, it's out of date." -  
*Primary leader, South East*

## **Evaluating whether SEN support has been effective**

### **The extent to which the review process informs future interventions**

Although most schools had a process in place for tracking SEN support, relatively few specified how evidence from reviews was used to adapt future interventions or measure success. This may, in part, reflect awareness of the process among the leaders and teachers interviewed.

In situations where adapting SEN support provision was reported, schools commonly assessed whether a pupil had been able to reach their target, and for those who were not on track, amending learning plans and the support accordingly.

Other schools held a termly meeting, with senior staff and/or the pupil and their parents, to evaluate provision. At these meetings, they discussed progress made, which could

lead to escalating, reducing, or changing existing support. One school outlined how termly progress reports contained a formal scale on the effectiveness of the support provided.

A few schools used external specialists to evaluate the SEN support they had in place on an annual basis. They were used to determine the effectiveness of the support and suggest new strategies if the pupil was not making progress as expected.

"Is that provision that is currently in place best supporting that child and whether we could put new strategies in place, or not." - *Primary teacher, East of England*

A minority of schools who adopted an ongoing or continuous review process (via testing and teacher observations) highlighted how they were able to identify interventions that were not working and adjust the support while the intervention was ongoing. There was evidence of a connection between the frequency of the review process and evaluation of support. Almost all of the schools that had an evaluation process in place adopted a systemic approach which took place at least once a term, but more often than not, on a six-week basis.

## **What does success look like?**

Most schools felt that the SEN support they provide was effective. For those who did not, capacity within the SEN team was considered to be the main barrier. Being able to deliver timely interventions and review whether those interventions had been effective were more challenging for these schools.

For those who did consider the SEN support they provide to be effective, the criteria for measuring success was difficult to establish. One school leader felt that an effective approach was one which ensured that pupils with SEN did not have a disparity when they move on from the school, but school leaders rarely talked about success in terms of pupils no longer needing support. Instead, it was more likely to be measured in terms of meeting targets within the agreed time, whether that is exam results or behaviour targets (not being permanently excluded, for example) or 'softer' wellbeing targets (about general engagement in the classroom).

"Success is a child that comes to school, is happy in school and is making progress in school." - *Secondary leader, West Midlands*

Achieving 'success', however that may be defined, was generally considered to be the result of the staff involved in the process, particularly their knowledge and experience of providing support alongside the frequency of checks put in place.

Almost all of those schools who considered their provision for pupils receiving SEN support effective had a regular, formal review process in place which considered the views of teaching staff, the SENCO and frequently members of the SLT. Others highlighted the crucial role played by a strong, proactive SENCO, as the key to a successful SEN approach, alongside staff highly committed to supporting children with SEN. Regular meetings with the SENCO, good knowledge sharing and regular training or collaboration with other schools and/or external bodies were also highlighted as the key to success.

“We are pretty strong in making sure we collaborate with other schools and other organisations, to find out best practice, share best practice and make sure we continue to move forward.” - *Secondary leader, London*

Other measures of success included instances where schools said they were known locally for their SEN provision, by the local authority, other schools, and by parents. These schools were considered to be a guiding light for delivery of SEN support that other schools could follow.

## **What works well in the process of reviewing support for pupils with SEN?**

This section looks at what leaders and teachers identified as working well in their approach to reviewing the support provided to pupils with SEN.

### **Reviewing support at the start and end of interventions, rather than termly**

A common approach taken to reviewing SEN support was to collect data at the start and end point of interventions. This enabled staff to easily measure the impact of an intervention, or to take a different route if the intervention was not a good fit for the pupil.

“Regularly checked to identify how pupil is progressing and working with their targets outlined in [pupil] passports. Kept up-to date regularly, every six weeks.” - *Secondary teacher, North West*

### **Teaching and support staff working closely with the SENCO**

The frequency of reviews was typically dependent on the resources the school had available. Key to this working well was having a SENCO with the time to plan and implement a systemised approach to reviewing SEN support. However, most schools felt this could only work if a ‘360-degree approach’ was adopted, incorporating the views of all relevant members of the teaching and support staff. Involving these groups was particularly important as they had the closest relationship with the pupil and were the key link between home and school.

“They all play an equal part’ - ‘everyone’s got their bit of information that adds to the jigsaw.” - *Secondary leader, West Midlands*

### **Adopting a rounded approach**

A minority of schools highlighted the importance of incorporating a qualitative element into the review process, particularly observation of the pupil in class. Other qualitative approaches included the use of photobooks, which were generally the responsibility of the pupil to update.

### **Information on SEN support being made available at the point of transition from primary to secondary school settings**

Almost all primary schools provided examples of how they actively shared information on SEN support at the point at which a pupil makes the transition to another primary school or to secondary education. Information shared was

typically in the form of an individual file for each pupil; either a paper, electronic file or shared via software (e.g., CPOMS). This included medical information, learning plans, and progress trackers. Some schools went 'the extra mile' and met with the SENCO or class teacher from the transition school to discuss individual pupils support needs.

## **What could be improved upon in the process of reviewing SEN support?**

This section looks at what schools felt could be improved upon in their approach to reviewing SEN support.

### **Increasing the frequency of reviews**

A small number of schools, notably secondary schools, did not have a set timetable in place for reviewing SEN support. Teachers frequently described the collection of information regarding SEN support as ad-hoc, or only undertaken as part of a process to review the quality of teaching, which meant that it was not possible to evaluate the impact of individual interventions.

“From time to time, the SENCO will send out an audit or questionnaire asking about various aspects of how we support, what is in place within the classroom, etc. I don't think we have been observed by the SENCO to see how we are dealing with things. It's more part of the overall processes of observing the quality of teaching.” - *Secondary teacher, North West*

### **Introducing a consistent method of data collection to feed into SEN support reviews**

Most schools used a standard management information system for collating data on behaviour, attendance and test results e.g., SIMS, but there was a lack of uniformity in regard to collating SEN-specific information. Some schools had devised their own 'bespoke' methods using Excel or Word, whereas others had adopted packages recommended by the local authority, their trust or other schools. This lack of uniformity impacted on the ability to share information within schools, and in some cases impacted on information being shared between educational settings.

## **Ensuring that the findings of reviews are circulated to all members of the teaching staff**

Typically, information gathered on SEN support was only shared with the SLT, and the teachers or support assistants who worked directly with pupils with SEN, due to GDPR or other privacy issues. This lack of dissemination to wider staff was a concern to some leaders and teachers who felt that it could lead to a lack of awareness of some pupil's needs, impacting the school's ability to provide holistic support to pupils.

## **Information sharing from secondary to a post-16 setting**

Secondary school teachers and leaders acknowledged the important of passing on information regarding SEN support, but unlike primary settings, few were aware of how, or in some cases whether, their school shared information at the point of transition. There were exceptions, with a minority of SENCOs or tutors visiting post-16 settings to outline what support had worked best. Some schools benefited from being part of a borough-wide SEN or Transition Group, which provided a forum for sharing information.

"If they leave our school, we always share everything that we have on file, otherwise you send the child on to fail before they have even started." - *Secondary leader, East Midlands*

## **Supporting schools to put in place a system for measuring the success of SEN support and using the results to adjust future interventions**

Few schools specified how evidence from reviews had been used to adjust future interventions or measure success. Criteria used for measuring success were hard to identify and where they existed typically focused on assessing whether a pupil had met their target. Only one school reported using an effectiveness scale to rate interventions and examples of using external specialists to evaluate SEN support were rare.

## Chapter 5: Summary and conclusions

Previous, recent research conducted by DfE into SEN support, has either tended to:

- Use quantitative methods (for example “SEN Support: a survey of schools and colleges” in 2017);<sup>6</sup>
- Focus on settings practising successful methods of SEN support (for example “SEN support: Case studies from schools and colleges” in 2017)<sup>7</sup>

This research study has enabled research findings on SEN support to be updated, and in using qualitative discussions with teachers and leaders across a range of settings, this has enabled an in-depth understanding of the approaches used for identifying, delivering and reviewing their SEN support.

We believe this is timely research for DfE. Not only is the proportion of pupils receiving SEN support rising (see chapter 1), but other research conducted by IFF Research for DfE has shown that around one in eight (13%) school leaders in June 2021 disagreed that their school was able to effectively support pupils with SEND.<sup>8</sup> Further, when asked about the start of the academic year 2021/22, around two-thirds anticipated each of the following barriers to their being able to provide effective support for pupils with SEND: an increase in the number of pupils with differing needs, a lack of access to specialist services or professionals, and staff supporting a large number of pupils with differing needs. Half also mentioned a lack of capacity in the school workforce.

### Identifying pupils with SEN

Schools were generally positive about their school’s approach to identifying SEN. They incorporated a range of approaches in the process, with teacher observations, SENCO assessments and baseline testing playing a key role in the process.

For the vast majority of schools, the process in place at their school was clear and used consistently for all pupils. SENCOs were involved in the process following an initial concern about a pupil being raised (either through teachers’ observations, tests results or parents contacting the school). Their role was integral, collating information from a range of sources (other teachers, direct assessment and information provided from previous educational settings) to build to a decision about whether the pupil required SEN support.

In some schools, the SENCO would visit (or have detailed discussions with) feeder educational settings to observe the pupils with SEN due to arrive at the school the following year and to talk to the teachers (or the SENCO). This was felt to provide

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<sup>6</sup> [SEN support: a survey of schools and colleges](#)

<sup>7</sup> [SEN support: Case studies from schools and colleges](#)

<sup>8</sup> [COVID-19 School Snapshot Panel Findings from the June Survey](#)



valuable insight about their incoming pupils with SEN and what does and might work for them (beyond what can be gained from written records), though clearly it is resource/time intensive.

Baseline testing (on general skills – literacy, numeracy – as well as screening for specific SEN) where used was also felt to be important as it allowed schools to identify potential needs at the earliest opportunity, rather than issues emerging during the school year.

Schools cited a range of barriers to identifying SEN, as well as improvements to their own internal processes. These barriers and improvements centred around timeliness of identifying need, as well as risks of need being overlooked. The key barriers were resources in the classroom, difficulties accessing SEN specialists (in a timely manner) and information from previous settings not being complete, all of which meant pupils were at risk of ‘falling through the gaps’ and if SEN needs were not identified early, of falling behind in their learning.

## **Meeting the needs of pupils with SEN**

Schools were generally confident that their provision could meet the needs of pupils with SEN. Quality First Teaching was felt to be central whereby teachers adopt techniques that aim to be inclusive for every child in a classroom. In these schools, it was considered that what was good for pupils with SEN was considered good for all.

Delivering specific learning interventions was also a common occurrence, and these were typically administered by TAs. These, typically six-week, programmes focused on specific skills areas where the pupil was struggling.

SEN specialists such as EPs and SaLTs were important constituents in successful SEN support. Their role was multifaceted and involved working individually with pupils to refine suitable provisions, developing pupils’ objectives in their IEPs, providing feedback and guidance to SENCOs, and conducting check-in observations to review teachers. They were also involved in training TAs to deliver the aforementioned learning interventions.

Best practice appeared to derive from a highly active SENCO who communicated with colleagues across the school about the roles and responsibilities of staff members in the delivery of SEN support, who made colleagues aware of the interventions taking place, the principles of teaching pupils with SEN and trained teachers to meet the needs of pupils with SEN. Schools with a less active SENCO who had not developed consistent systems for staff to adhere to (around delivery and feedback relating to SEN support) felt they were at risk of not supporting pupils receiving SEN support as well as they could.

Best practice was also evident in the schools that engaged in regular communication about pupils receiving SEN support. In these schools, an open dialogue was facilitated

whereby teachers were encouraged to share their concerns or observations about what does and does not work well in the delivery of SEN support to a specific pupil. These schools, predominantly smaller, primary schools, considered themselves highly agile and responsive to the needs of their pupils with SEN.

Improvements to meeting the needs pupils receiving SEN support included better communication and engagement with parents. Some schools reported that their approach here could be more collaborative, and the insight gained from parents would have helped them better deliver support to pupils with SEN.

In terms of the delivery of SEN support provision, the level of direct engagement SENCOs had with class teachers, TAs and pupils varied considerably by school phase. Reflecting their smaller size, in primary schools, teaching and support staff had much greater ability to access quickly / communicate directly with the SENCO about their concerns or observations, whereas secondary teachers generally had less regular dialogue with the SENCO or did so, at least initially, by email.

## **Reviewing and evaluating the needs of pupils with SEN**

While schools tended to have quite systematic processes for the identification of SEN, schools had less rigorous processes for reviewing or evaluating their support for pupils with SEN.

Most schools were actively engaging teachers in data tracking on interventions, but few of these tracking systems required teachers to rate the efficacy of different approaches with each child, the suggestion being that the data collected on SEN support provision did not tend to be analytical or self-reflective, but merely record progress against targets.

Further, schools had a mixed approach to the formal review process. While some schools had regular, termly or half-termly reviews in place, other schools did not appear to have regular formal systems (and instead were more ad-hoc, and this was often the case where the review was the responsibility of individual teachers, rather than overseen by the SENCO or SLT). Frequency of the review process was linked to better outcomes for pupils receiving SEN support, as schools with continual monitoring processes were able to adapt their provision in an agile way – they could tweak provision to better assist pupils receiving SEN support.

With regards to information sharing, primary schools were considerably more advanced than secondary schools. Primary schools consistently shared information with secondary schools but secondary schools were less aware of the processes they had in place with post-16 education providers. Further, the level of information transferred varied between phases, with primary schools providing more detailed data including medical information, learning plans, and progress tracking data.

School leaders rarely talked about 'success' in relation to SEN support in terms of pupils no longer needing support. Instead, it was more likely to be measured in terms of meeting targets within the agreed time, whether that is exam results or behaviour targets (not being permanently excluded, for example) or 'softer' wellbeing targets (about general engagement in the classroom).

## Further research

This research has shown that schools generally have a rounded approach to the processes of identifying SEN and meeting the needs of pupils receiving SEN support. However, it has shown that monitoring and systematic reviewing of SEN support is less well developed, particularly in relation to critically reflecting on the effectiveness of support. Research to explore the benefits that effective reviewing of SEN support has and can bring to schools, and how DfE might best assist SENCOs / schools to improve their review processes, would be worth considering.

The research has touched on the importance of parental involvement in the identification, meeting need and SEN support review process, but relatively little is known about how well SEN support is working from the perspective of parents. Similarly this research has shown the relative importance of the role of teaching assistants in the SEN support provided by schools, but little is known about the effectiveness of the training and support they receive to deliver this support. Both areas might be useful for further investigation.



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