



The Children's Plan

The Children's Commissioner's School Census

A Summary

SEPTEMBER 2025

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



When I became a teacher more than 30 years ago, and later a headteacher, I saw how powerful great teaching can be. I was part of a wave of reform that brought urgency and belief that every child could succeed with the right support. It was exciting. Those reforms worked. Schools got better, standards rose, and outcomes improved – but not for every child. In that, we failed.

Too many—particularly the most vulnerable—have been left behind. The next phase of education reform must focus on them: children facing barriers to learning, unstable home lives, or living with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). The pandemic made these issues impossible to ignore. I was still a school leader then, and I saw how schools became lifelines—providing food, care, and safety. Vulnerable children continued to attend because we knew daily contact with trusted adults was essential. That broader role isn't new—but the crisis brought it into sharp focus.

That commitment to children's social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is something I believe sets us apart as a nation. It is also why I became a teacher. I wasn't just interested in educating, but also in forming, shaping, and developing children. I knew from personal experience that a great teacher can change a life, and I made it my mission to pay back that debt.

Schools have always known their job is more than delivering lessons. They develop character, confidence, and compassion. My census confirms that schools continue to take this responsibility

seriously. But this role they play in children's wider lives is often overlooked in public debate. That must change.

Leaders told me they are doing far more than ever before to support children's social and emotional needs—often without the systems to back them. While schools have benefited from decades of reform and investment, wider services—mental health, social care, early help—have not. We must rebuild those services or better support schools to continue filling the gap.

This includes support for children with SEND, those in poverty, care, or experiencing poor mental health. They don't need different teaching—they need access to great schools and consistent support. But even brilliant teaching can't make living with domestic abuse easier or mitigate against being homeless. Without broader support, these children won't be able to achieve as they should.

The services that these children need lie outside the classroom, and they have not benefited from the same rigour, focus, or investment as schools. While schools feel confident in teaching and behaviour, their central function, they report needing help with attendance, parental engagement, and pastoral care. These are not marginal issues. Nearly four in ten children are identified as SEND and will need additional help with learning at some point. One in four will need a social worker. A million live in destitution. Over a million miss school regularly. Despite schools' best efforts, our response isn't good enough.

Children themselves told me this. In my Big Ambition survey, many said they value their teachers, but a third said they don't enjoy school. Among teens, this figure rose to over half. We must make school a safe, trusted space for all children.

That's why I launched this census—to understand what challenges children bring to school, how schools respond, and what more is needed. The findings show schools stepping up to fill gaps, but with inconsistent support and little coordination. Alarmingly, much of this data has never been collected before.

This report sets out a vision based on what a million children and now what thousands of school leaders have told me. It lays out a vision to transform our education system ahead of the Government's School's White Paper, to make sure those children who need more than just brilliant teaching, including those children with disabilities or additional needs, can have their ambitions met. As politicians return to

Westminster after the summer recess, this is the single biggest issue facing them – families, parents and children are desperate for change.

We must move away from the idea of “special” needs and toward “additional” needs. Most children will need something extra at some point. We shouldn’t make them feel there’s something wrong with them because our systems can’t meet that need, and we mustn’t shoehorn them into a SEND system that isn’t designed for them. No child should be pushed to getting a medical diagnosis for behaviours that are natural responses to the challenges they are facing in their lives. No child should think they are the problem for feeling sad, or different.

We need a system that’s inclusive by design—where schools are equipped to meet diverse needs, and support is available locally. Children told me they want simple things: to go to a good school, learn with their friends, and feel safe. These must be guarantees, not luxuries.

Teaching remains the single most powerful driver of change. Teaching a child to read is still one of the most radical ways to change a life. But for some children, that must be part of a broader offer—recognising schools’ social, emotional, and pastoral role. This means ensuring schools are backed by strong local partnerships, well-resourced services, and properly trained staff. Inclusion must be the foundation of a fair education system. Children and parents deserve confidence that their school has the expertise and capacity to help them thrive.

This report is a first step toward that goal. It paints a clear picture of the pressures schools face and calls for action: more specialist staff, integrated provision, better coordination across services, and a system that’s easier for families to navigate.

The next great education reform starts now. It must have ambition, drive, and the same unshakeable belief that I had as a headteacher: that education can transform lives, so that every child has the chance to attain, excel and achieve their ambitions. We’ve done it for some. Now is the time to do it for all.

Report Findings

This report presents national evidence about the range of children's needs in schools, and the ways schools are responding to meet these needs. A census was sent to all state-funded schools in England, asking them about the needs of their children and the pastoral support staff roles and resources they provide, and barriers to providing that support. Responses were received for 86% of schools. Data presented here is focused on state-funded mainstream primary and secondary schools. Over the coming months, findings focussed on special schools and alternative provision, and colleges, will be published.

The Commissioner's census found

- **Children have a wide range of additional needs outside of the classroom, but schools don't always know what they are.** 60% of state-funded mainstream schools could not report on exactly how many children had experienced the bereavement of someone important to them, 62% could not report exactly on how many lived in unsuitable accommodation, and 43% could not report exactly if their children had a parent/carer in prison. For every pupil characteristic the Children's Commissioner asked schools to provide a number for, primary schools were more likely to be able to provide an actual number than secondary schools.
- **Schools are worried about problems beyond the school gate.** Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was a top four concern for 70% of primary schools and 78% of secondary schools. More than half of primary and half of secondary schools view child safety online as a top four concern.
 - **More secondary schools are worried about the funding of wider services than they are about their own funding.** Over half of primary and secondary schools viewed funding of wider services for children as a top four concern.
 - **Schools worry most about issues where they need help from other services.** The top concern for secondary schools was attendance - 63% of secondary schools view attendance as a top four concern, as do 44% of primary schools. Similarly, the experiences and progress of children with EHCPs/on SEND support is a top concern for 53% primary schools and 40%

secondary schools. Availability of local services was perceived as a barrier to providing additional support by 69% of primary and 81% of secondary schools. Secondary schools were almost twice as worried about misogyny and sexism as curriculum.

- **School leaders view the availability of funding and overall staff capacity as barriers to providing additional support.** Availability of funding was cited by 95% of primary schools and 94% of secondary schools, and overall staff capacity was cited by 78% of primary and 74% of secondary schools. For implementing EHCPs, the main barrier in both primary (69%) and secondary schools (72%) was funding not matching need, with a lack of specialist staffing cited as the second biggest barrier. Secondary schools were better able to make adjustments for pupils with SEND. However, reasonable adjustments for pupils with SEND that may necessitate additional cost, staff capacity or changes to the physical space are the most common reasonable adjustments that schools say they are unable to make. More than a quarter of secondary schools and almost one third of primary schools said they were unable to provide access to extra teaching assistant support.
 - **School's responses to children's challenges vary.** Schools are already doing a great deal for their children, but support varies by phase, region, level of deprivation and needs of their cohort. There is a lack of clarity on what effective practice is, where this support is regulated, and what schools are paying for this wider support.
 - **On average, primary schools provide fewer support roles in school than secondary schools.** Secondary schools have more of the surveyed staff roles in school than primary schools (2.9 roles in secondary schools compared to 1.4 in primary schools). Additionally, more than one third of primary schools do not have any of the surveyed staff roles in school, compared to just under one in 10 secondary schools.
 - 42% of primary schools and 82% of secondary schools provided a mental health counsellor.
 - Fewer than half of primary schools (44%) and 68% of secondary schools have any kind of provision of school nurses.
 - Only one in 10 primary schools and one in 20 secondary schools had a Family Hub on-site.
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- **London based secondary schools were often most likely to have a staff role provided.** An exception was family liaison/support officers, where London had the lowest provision (51% of secondary schools had this role compared to 61% of secondary schools in the South East). **There were large regional differences in primary schools with a school nursery.** 83% of schools in the North East had a nursery run by the school compared with 43% of schools in the South East.
- **There are differences by deprivation. In general, the most deprived schools are more likely to have provision of a role/resource.** Primary schools with more deprived pupils are more likely to offer family and community support services. Nearly three-quarters (73%) have a Family Liaison Support Officer, compared to just over a third (36%) of schools in the with the least deprived pupils. Additionally, primary schools with high levels of pupil deprivation are more than four times as likely to host a Family Hub or children's centre (18% vs. 4%).
- **Schools have different views of the support they should provide. Some want to be doing more.** For primary schools, there is still demand for roles supporting children's mental health, development and family needs. Of those without an existing role in school, more than 75% wanted to provide a mental health counsellor, speech and language therapist, family liaison/support officer, Educational Psychologist, and Education Mental Health Practitioner. Responses showed a similar story for secondary schools. More than 75% of secondary schools without the role want a mental health counsellor, a family liaison/support officer, an Educational Psychologist, and an Education Mental Health Practitioner.
- **Schools' provision is often delivered through external partners.** Many schools told us that the support students were receiving was delivered via external provision. This raises potential questions about the cost, quality and consistency of provision, the commissioning structures and processes of schools, and the level of regulation, control and oversight of provision. 30% of secondary schools used external provision for their mental health counsellors. Schools are often doing what they can to fill gaps left by the withdrawal of other services - particularly from local authorities, and with long waiting lists for some health services - but often that has little direction or oversight.

Key charts and tables

Figure 1 – School leader concerns for pupils in school by school phase

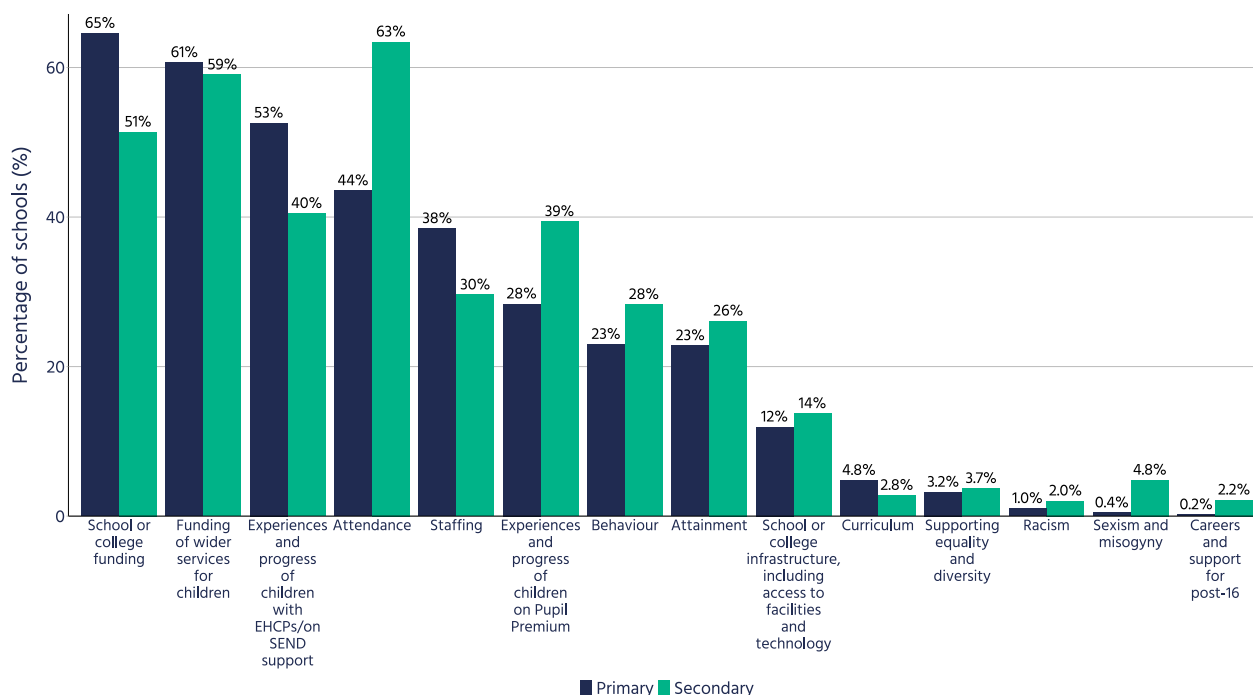


Figure 2 – School leader concerns for pupils in the local area by school phase

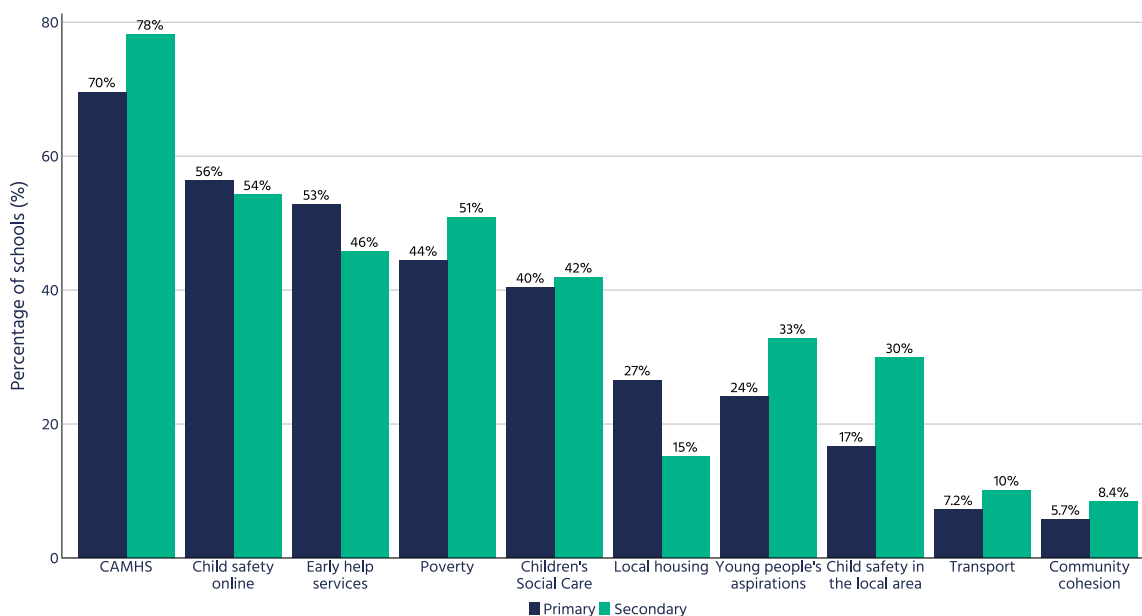


Figure 3 – Barriers to providing additional support to pupils by school phase

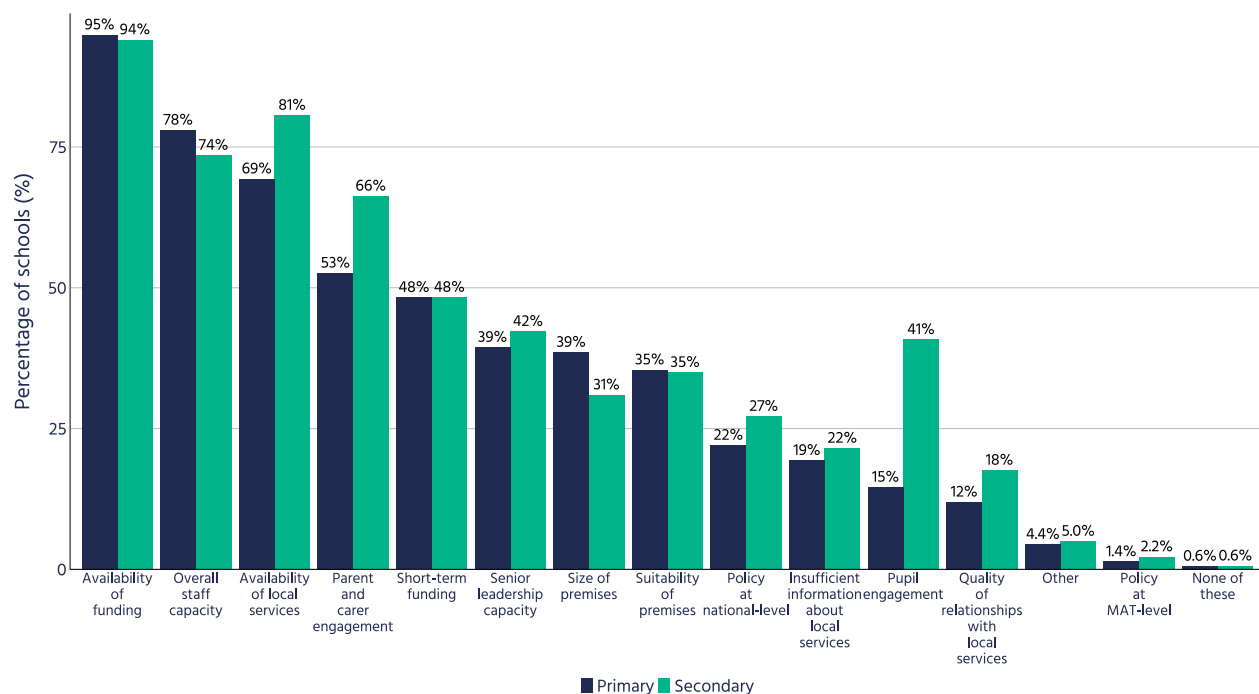


Table 1 – Staff roles by type of provision for primary and secondary schools

	Primary Schools			Secondary Schools		
	Any provision	Role in school	External provision	Any provision	Role in school	External provision
A mental health counsellor	42% (5996)	17% (2422)	25% (3619)	82% (2283)	54% (1488)	30% (826)
A staff member for supporting UASC	10% (1402)	1% (148)	9.0% (1258)	21% (571)	9% (233)	13% (343)
A family liaison/support officer	51% (7379)	39% (5631)	12% (1759)	58% (1602)	43% (1203)	15% (411)
A staff member for supporting young carers	34% (4888)	23% (3243)	12% (1662)	60% (1675)	51% (1411)	10% (282)
A school nurse	44% (6249)	2.0% (277)	42% (5978)	68% (1891)	22% (620)	46% (1280)
A speech and language therapist	63% (9041)	13% (1806)	51% (7298)	57% (1556)	10% (280)	47% (1286)
A Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or Safer Schools Police Officer (SSO)	32% (4603)	1.0% (146)	31% (4459)	56% (1572)	9% (260)	47% (1312)
A social worker	35% (4929)	0.8% (107)	34% (4826)	37% (1036)	3.0% (84)	34% (952)
A youth worker	11% (1553)	0.7% (92)	10% (1462)	36% (999)	7.9% (217)	29% (789)
An Educational Psychologist	65% (9369)	8% (1146)	58% (8245)	69% (1931)	11% (300)	59% (1636)
An Education Mental Health Practitioner	46% (6503)	17% (2404)	29% (4131)	64% (1777)	27% (751)	37% (1036)
An English as an Additional Language Coordinator	32% (4559)	21% (2904)	12% (1669)	57% (1562)	47% (1297)	10% (274)

Table 2 – Resources by type of provision for primary and secondary schools

	Primary Schools			Secondary Schools		
	Any provision	Run by the school	Run by external provider on-site	Any provision	Run by the school	Run by external provider on-site
A Family Hub or children's centre	11% (1551)	2% (347)	9% (1216)	5% (149)	1% (27)	4.5% (123)
A nursery	60% (8636)	53% (7575)	8% (1093)	7.5% (206)	3% (100)	4% (106)
A room for children's wellbeing	71% (10199)	70% (10093)	1.2% (177)	81% (2258)	80% (2231)	1.9% (53)
A sexual health clinic	0.9% (124)	0% (7)	1% (117)	13% (356)	0.7% (20)	12% (338)
A vaccination clinic	13% (1823)	0.5% (71)	12% (1754)	37% (1036)	2% (60)	35% (977)
An internal Alternative Provision (AP)	11% (1519)	8% (1122)	3% (407)	35% (972)	30% (835)	5.6% (154)
An outdoor space for children to play or learn in	98% (14146)	98% (14120)	0.4% (63)	92% (2562)	92% (2557)	0.5% (14)
Breakfast provision	88% (12606)	74% (10582)	15% (2126)	79% (2206)	77% (2143)	2.5% (70)
Enrichment activities: art, drama, music	95% (13639)	89% (12871)	12% (1679)	99% (2784)	99% (2773)	2% (64)
Enrichment activities: sport	99% (14201)	91% (13047)	17% (2405)	100% (2786)	100% (2779)	2% (66)
Free food provision for families	43% (6116)	23% (3217)	21% (3045)	37% (1034)	24% (665)	14% (396)
Holiday activities provided free of charge	34% (4877)	9% (1315)	26% (3633)	41% (1145)	23% (640)	19% (540)
Social and emotional wellbeing interventions	95% (13703)	92% (13221)	10% (1443)	97% (2712)	93% (2603)	13% (365)

Student participation (e.g. student council)	97% (14034)	97% (14007)	0.3% (49)	99% (2764)	99% (2763)	0.5% (14)
Wrap-around childcare	79% (11366)	58% (8319)	23% (3357)	12% (331)	9.5% (263)	3% (74)
Youth work	12% (1674)	3% (482)	9% (1208)	49% (1361)	18% (490)	33% (914)

Recommendations

The education system is at a critical juncture. Growing challenges with SEND provision, stubborn absence rates, and widening attainment gaps, call for ambitious reform. This report sets out a series of recommendations which would enable schools to better meet the needs of all their students and support them to attend, engage, attain and excel. Crucially, we recommend that the education system does more to support children with additional needs in the broadest sense.

1. A national statement of ambition for all children

The upcoming Education White Paper and subsequent reforms should provide a clear statement of ambition for all children. That should include concrete goals of reducing absence and every child being able to go to a school that can meet their needs, every day. The new vision should be backed by clear accountability with school and local level data for attendance, engagement, attainment, and progress being published.

2. A new focus on a broader range of additional needs for those who need support inside and outside the classroom

The education system should have a broader conception of need based on a new definition of 'additional needs'. This should include safety, pastoral, health and learning needs. That definition should be set out in a new additional needs framework which should detail different levels and types of need and what is expected of schools, and wider services, in terms of support.

It should be built on a clinically led review of how we best support children with neurodevelopmental conditions, ensuring that a disability diagnosis is not the only way to access support, or assess what help is needed. The Single Unique Identifier due to be introduced in the upcoming Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill must be implemented ambitiously and without delay so that schools understand children's lives without excessive new bureaucratic workload.

3. Extra help for schools to deliver targeted and specialist support where needed, and deepen their role, impact and orientation in communities

Schools are already doing a huge amount to respond to additional needs, but have limited capacity to do more systematically, and do not always have the information to know or understand children's wider circumstances, despite those circumstances often presenting in school. A shared management information system should be introduced to sit behind the Children's Plan (see Recommendation 4) to facilitate real-time data sharing between professionals. To address this there should be a new funding premium for additional needs and inclusion, for schools whose children have high levels of additional needs to help meet those needs.

This should fund a core offer from all schools. The first part of that core offer should ensure that schools are enabled to provide high quality pastoral support. The second part should be access to key professionals and services. Both should be funded by the new funding premium, with a strong evidence base for interventions, and strong data and accountability on the outcomes of the cohort.

This system would both help children and reduce pressures on teachers, who too often are being asked to step in as social workers, carers, and whilst teachers can and should support children with low level need, so as not to medicalise normal challenges, more acute support should be provided by professionals in schools.

4. A new approach to statutory education support: Education, Health and Care plans

The current system of statutory support for special educational needs is too narrow in its definition of 'need' but at the same time not specific enough about the levels of need that should attract support. A new approach should acknowledge the breadth of need that can act as a barrier to a child's ability to learn, while also detailing the levels of need and types of support that are effective. Reforms should include a number of key elements:

All children should have a plan, linked to their unique ID, set out a new digital Children's Plan platform. This should set out children's needs and the support to which they are entitled and the progress they make. All support for children would be set out on the Children's Plan platform,

ensuring all children benefit from a single view of the support they need. The level of that support will look different for children with different needs.

Some children will require an Education Plan, those who are not school ready, do not meet the expected standard of development, are not attending regularly, or who find learning hard, with support for almost all provided in their local mainstream school as part of an enhanced offer, including from the wider allied professionals located in schools. Some may require an Education and Care plan, for example those with a social worker or who are at risk of extra-familial harm. Some will require an Education and Health plan, such as those with acute or chronic health conditions, or mental health challenges. Crucially, EHCPs should be only for children whose needs sit across all three sectors: education, health, and care and should reflect this fact. Children with life-long, life-limiting, or life-determining conditions should be given statutory support plans until they are 25 automatically, and without a long assessment process. Children in care or living away from home in institutions should also have EHCPs.

Support should also be more responsive to early indicators of additional need. Children who are behind at key milestone checks at nine to 12 months, two and a half years, or in the Early Years Foundation Stage profile at age five, should have their support needs set out through the Education (and Health/Care) Plan. That could include being offered an additional year in Reception to they can be supported to begin Key Stage One meeting their key development milestones.

The Government should set out a timeframe for moving towards this plan, communicate the new provision clearly to children and those who care for them, and seek to bring in delivery for a new cohort of children. No child with an existing plan should lose their plan. No child should have to move school.

5. Delivering opportunity locally – Local Opportunity Mission Delivery Boards

Schools cannot help children with additional needs to succeed in education on their own. It must be a place-based priority, and we must focus on developing the broader children's workforce. We must incentivise and encourage our best and brightest talent to work across all the services children require and give local areas the powers they need to set out local strategies and allocate

the needed resources based on a proactive plan for their area, not reactively commissioning places. Every local authority should have a Director of Education or Chief Education Officer, to work alongside every school in a family of schools, to support leaders with attendance, basic need, commissioning of wider services, coordinating schools as safeguarding partners, improving the outcomes of children with an Education Plan and with inclusion and the Virtual School. Where appropriate, Regional Mayors should have greater powers to work regionally on addressing local need.

The key building block of this work should be a new specialist support fund, jointly funded at the population level between health, education, and children's social care. Local children's services and health services should be held accountable for the outcomes of children with additional needs – for instance for their attendance.

The Children's Commissioner will publish a unique data set to support that work, and will chair a group on ensuring the Unique ID is implemented in a way that works for children and families.

6. The critical role of special schools and Alternative Provision

The default for all children should be a mainstream school – inclusion by design for the benefit of children with SEND, and for those without. All children have the right to enjoy a mainstream education and the integration that confers. As such, there should be an assumption that pupils educated in non-mainstream settings (i.e. special schools or Alternative Provision) will return to mainstream wherever possible or remain registered in a mainstream school so they are able to do PE, music, art or enjoy lunch and travel all together.

There should an overarching framework for Alternative Provision which outlines how every child will receive support during their time in Alternative Provision. No child should be excluded to home. There should be a day one right to Alternative Provision.

Wherever possible, all families of schools should have both special and AP capacity. Whilst the imperative is for classrooms, schools and the school system to be inclusive, where specialist units work well, they should be encouraged as a mechanism for keeping children in mainstream education. Internal AP should wherever possible be delivered by schools themselves and not delivered by an external provider. No child should be placed in unregulated or unregistered AP.

7. Services beyond the school gate

The challenges many children face in attending, engaging and attaining in education cannot be solved by schools alone – whilst high quality adaptive teaching is imperative, and children who find learning hard or are vulnerable do not need something other pedagogically, it is not enough by itself for children who face challenges outside school. The proposals in this report will allow schools to better know and understand challenges their children face, and to better support them within school. But for those children who are facing significant challenges at home, whether that is experiencing domestic abuse, being criminally exploited, or struggling with a mental health disorder it is highly likely that they will need more than just brilliant teaching, they will need targeted support from fantastic children's services, beyond the school gate, not least because they may not be attending school in the first place. This will require significant reforms to children's social care, youth work, youth justice services and Children and Young People's Mental Health services.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to the thousands of school leaders who responded to this census, for their contribution to this data. For the first time, we have a detailed national picture of what knew anecdotally but could not calculate, until now: that schools and teachers are supporting children in more ways than ever, playing an increasingly vital social, emotional and pastoral role – but far too often, they are doing it without the support systems around them they need.

Your responses to this report will help shape the future of education in this country and rebuild the services that lie outside of the classroom.



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