

First choice and last resort: the unique role of maintained nursery schools in England in supporting children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

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Executive Summary

Maintained nursery schools are recognised as being centres of excellence for supporting children with SEND in the early years. A survey was undertaken in 2017-18 to assess the impact of funding changes on their ability to fulfil this role. It was completed by one-third of maintained nursery schools in England and found that:

- The 128 schools responding were supporting 2467 children with SEND, representing approximately 15% of children on roll including a mix of those with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans in place (148 children), those for whom the school was helping with the process of securing an EHC (603 children) and those eligible for SEN support (1716 children).
- A quarter of respondents offered specialist SEND provision (411 places across 31 schools, and a further 138 reserved places at 13 schools for children with SEND). This allowed nursery schools to budget from year to year to retain expert and experienced members of staff. However, such funding was being eroded, putting this specialist provision and staff expertise at risk.
- Staff at all levels within the nursery schools had a wide range of specialist qualifications, as well as providing their teams with extensive CPD on supporting children with SEND. They also bought in specialist external expertise such as educational psychologists and speech and language therapists.
- There were reports that increasing numbers of children with SEND were transferring to maintained nursery schools from other providers which could not meet their needs, including both private and voluntary (PVI) providers and primary schools, and demand resulting from a lack of places in special schools.
- Some schools reported that the funding received was no longer sufficient to pay the necessary rates for specialist staff.
- Few local authorities were making use of the staff expertise in maintained nursery schools to support the rest of the sector, although many were keen to do more of this work. Where they were providing such assistance, it was usually being done for little or no charge.
- There was little consistency across England as to the amount of funding available to support children with SEND in the early years, the eligibility criteria in place and the complexity of the processes for obtaining it.
- One in six of the schools responding received no additional funding for children with SEND, despite having children eligible for SEND support and others working towards EHCs, or with EHCs already in place.
- Regardless of the availability of funding, maintained nursery schools prioritised the admission of children with SEND.
- At a conservative estimate, schools spent an average of £17,000 more on SEND support than they received in funding in order to meet children's needs, but were concerned that the scope for cross-subsidy was reducing significantly.
- The Early Years National Funding Formula (EYNFF) was reported as improving availability of SEND funding by only 4% of respondents; 37% reported that less funding was available, or that there was a shortfall in respect of children eligible for the 30 hours, and 8% reported that administrative processes had become more onerous. Some reported that funding had already been reducing prior to the

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EYNFF. Issues were raised in relation to lack of SEND funding for 2-year-olds in some areas.

About maintained nursery schools

Maintained nursery schools are local authority-run schools for children under 5. They are subject to all the requirements which apply to other schools, including employing a headteacher and qualified teachers, appointing a teacher as a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) and having admissions policies which prioritise children with SEND. Most are based in disadvantaged communities, and they have a strong record in helping close the achievement gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as helping children with SEND to achieve at a similar level to their peers. This expertise in supporting children with SEND means that they are often the provider of first choice for parents of children with SEND and for health and other professionals helping place children with SEND, while also acting as a fall-back for those children who may be turned away from other settings which are not able to meet their needs. Funding cuts have led to a reduction in their numbers and there are now only 397 maintained nursery school in England, with numbers still falling, raising questions about the impact of potentially losing this vital specialist provision.

About the survey

The survey was conducted online via Survey Monkey between December 2017 and January 2018. A total of 128 separate maintained nursery schools responded, which is almost a third of the total (currently 397). They were located in 61 different local authorities, which represents more than half of all local authorities which have one or more maintained nursery schools. Not all schools responded to all questions; missing data is excluded from analysis of individual questions below.

Findings

Numbers of children with SEND

At the point of responding to the survey, the 128 respondents reported a total of 2467 children with SEND for whom extra support was provided in some form, approximately 15% of the children on roll. The schools had a total of 148 children with Education, Health and Care plans (EHCs) in place by the time of the survey (an average of 1.2 per school), and they were working towards securing EHCs for a further 603 children (an average of 4.8 per school). In addition, they had 1716 children eligible for SEN support (an average of 13.4 per school).

Specialist provision

Some nursery schools are commissioned by their local authorities to provide specialist provision – 31 respondents provided a total 411 places in specialist provision between them. 13 nursery schools held reserved places for children with SEND, totally 138 places between them. For specialist provision, and in some cases for reserved places, this means place-based funding rather than funding being linked solely to the child. This has the advantage of allowing nursery schools to plan and budget from year to year and therefore to retain expert and experienced members of

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staff. One nursery school reported a flexible arrangement across the nursery schools within the local authority: “The nursery schools in X share a Resourced provision funding pot based on funding 2 places for children with SEND at each school. Each school receives £10000 and the remaining 60 000 is allocated according to need.”

However, such arrangements are being eroded, meaning schools no longer have the guaranteed funding from year to year which enabled them to retain specialist staff on long-term contracts to keep their expertise.

“Up until summer we had a SEND assessment class that children were referred to by an Educational psychologist with specialist staff, this was zero funded by the Local Authority last year with no replacement service. There is now no specialist nursery provision available until children have an EHC and this in in some special schools but not all. We had staff that were experts in autism and Pex etc but the teacher was made redundant by the LA in summer.”

Letting the funding follow the child and allow parents to have a greater choice of setting may sound sensible, but a setting which only intermittently has children with SEND is not in a position to build up staff skills and expertise, particularly for children with more complex needs. Maintained nursery schools have a clear track record in successfully supporting children with SEND, and it therefore makes sense to fund a core of provision to allow nursery schools to continue acting as centres of excellence for children with SEND. This not only benefits children with SEND able to receive specialist support in the nursery school, but also provides an expert team to support other settings.

“All staff have many years of experience in working with children with ASD, Speech and Language difficulties. We have a child who should be in the reception class, but parents did not feel that he would be able to cope as he has a number of learning difficulties. In the past we have kept children in Nursery as the local Primary schools did not feel that they could meet their needs.”

One respondent also raised the following point about the role of maintained nursery schools in offering an inclusive experience to children with SEND:

“I believe that MNS offer an opportunity for children to successfully access main stream schooling, when otherwise they would only ever have specialist provision, this is particularly valued by families, it gives them time to be part of local school community- eg getting to meet other parents also gives all our children experience of children with specific needs”

Staffing

Respondents reported that their staff had a broad range of specialist qualifications (see appendix 1) and many also provided in-house CPD as well as other ongoing professional development opportunities, for example “comprehensive inhouse CPD program including Makaton, Attention Autism, Speech and Language strategies, autism strategies and 3 EYP's currently doing their foundation degree in Inclusion and Special Education.”

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Staff at all levels in the nursery schools were being deployed in various aspects of SEND support, with Deputy and Assistant Headteachers as well as teachers taking on the SENCO role, and SEND support being provided to children by a range of learning support assistants/teaching assistants as well as by teachers and early years educators.

Nursery schools also reported buying in a range of external expertise:

- Autism/ASD outreach practitioners
- Behaviour support
- CAMHS, child psychotherapists
- Educational psychologists
- Interpreters for TAF meetings/home visits for parental support
- Moving & handling trainers
- Music therapists
- Occupational therapists
- Physical difficulties support
- Physiotherapy
- Portage Workers.
- Speech & Language Therapists
- SEN Advisory teacher /support visits from a specialist teacher
- SEND sports coach
- Sensory profiling for child with severe autism
- Specialist nurses.
- Teachers for the deaf/hearing impaired and visually impaired
- training from health to support specific needs of children in the setting.

Some mentioned increasing difficulties funding the Service Level Agreements for services such as Educational Psychology.

Schools reported that in some cases SEND funding is no longer sufficient to pay the necessary rates for specialist staff.

“If a child comes to us who needs SEND support we have to apply for inclusion funding. This is a flat rate of £7.30 (there is no increase for children with more significant needs). If we need to employ 1:1 support staff this funding does not cover their additional costs such as superannuation, so we have to pay this out of our general budget.”

“All high needs funding spent on 1:1 support, this costs our setting £2.32 per hour with on costs for workers paid on living wage. This rate of pay is lower than some of our cleaners.”

“the hourly rate used does not recognise the levels of pay we are required to pay as a LA school and therefore we lose for every hour of support we offer.”

“One of the main issues we currently face is the short term nature of funding which makes retention of the skills and consistency of staffing and support difficult to achieve.”

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Supporting children with SEND elsewhere in the sector

Respondents reported that greater numbers of children with SEND were transferring to maintained nursery schools from other providers which could not meet their needs. Further research is needed to ascertain whether this reflects difficulties with funding for PVI settings, or other factors such as availability of local authority support. There are also clearly issues of some primary schools not being able to meet children's needs, and lack of places in special schools.

“We cater for several children who have extremely complex needs. Some of these children should be attending school but there is nowhere suitable for them to go or they are awaiting a place in a special needs school. Many of our children who have a EHCP have been turned down from several nurseries in the PVI sector as they do not have the skills to meet the needs of these extremely challenging children.”

“The DfE should undertake an equality impact assessment to consider the impact on children with SEND who would lose a nursery school place, in the event of closure. Because we are not business - we do not seek to make a profit, therefore all funding is spent on securing enhanced ratios for children with SEND. This year we have spent £56,180 supporting SEND against inclusion grant / DAF of £11,695. The PVI sector is just not able to do this. We secure additional funding because our talented senior leadership team write many bids for additional funding and undertake external consultancy work to secure additional funding. As a result of our inclusive learning environment, curriculum and skilled practice, children with SEND make outstanding progress.”

They also reported that relatively few local authorities were making use of the staff expertise in maintained nursery schools to support the rest of the sector in meeting the needs of children with SEND. Nursery schools saw this as a missed opportunity (“We are trying to get the LA to allow us to do this more! We have just started hosting a network meeting, but that is all at the moment”). One nursery school reported their LA was proposing “to remove funding directly to maintained schools to provide general EY SEN advice from the EY SEND team. Many of our team have more expertise and there is limited availability with staff shortages in the central team.” It was also clear that in many cases this is a service nursery schools are providing for low or no charge: “We support numerous visits to our setting in relation to inclusion and SEND that we do not charge for”. There were isolated examples of good practice such as a local authority commissioning a staff member from a nursery school to be the local area SENCO for early years.

Funding

There appears to be little if any consistency across the country as to the amount of funding availability to support children with SEND, the eligibility criteria for obtaining it and the complexity of the processes for obtaining it.

The ways in which SEND provision was funded at responding schools varied hugely, with components of different models including:

- DAF funding

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- Inclusion funding/EHCP payments/high needs block in varying forms:
 - Additional hourly rates per child, sometimes at tiered rates according to LA's assessment of level of need
 - Lump sums per child
 - Lump sums for a fixed number of places, though these could vary from year to year
 - Emerging needs funding
 - Outreach support in lieu of funding

17 respondents (13%) indicated that they were receiving no SEND funding, although all had children working towards EHCs and eligible for SEND support, and two also had children with EHCs. One school commented "It is almost impossible to get High needs block funding or an EHCP". A federation of two nursery schools in a different LA, wrote "We currently receive no additional SEND funding and have no option to reserve places because that would not be funded. Our admissions policy prioritises children with needs." Another wrote: "22% of our whole cohort are classified as SEND which is double the national average. Yet somehow we are expected to find the money from our ever shrinking budgets to fund SEND children ourselves. It just can't be done. The SENDIF fund does not encompass 2-year-olds so there is currently no in year funding to support 2-year-olds with SEND."

The average amount received per child was:

£2,556 for a child with an EHC

£1,020 for a child for whom the process of trying to obtain an EHC was underway

£730 for a child eligible for SEND support

However, as indicated above, these figures mask huge differences, with some settings reporting having no additional financial support even for children with an EHC.

Costs of SEND support

Some respondents gave an estimated total of what they were spending on SEND support. These figures suggested schools spent an average of £17,000 more annually than they received in SEND support funding, although this is possibly a conservative estimate as costings were not done on a consistent basis.

Schools reported having to find other sources of funding to ensure children's needs were met, despite the fact that the EYNFF makes no allowance for SEND in the universal base rate and supplements – and research for the DfE had noted that this model of "notional funding" which operates in the school sector was not appropriate to the early years. As MNS's budgets are reducing year on year, the scope for cross-subsidy is also reducing significantly.

Changes under the EYNFF

Only 4% identified an improvement in funding for SEND in the previous year. Just over half (55%) reported no change in the availability of funding for SEND over the past year, although in some cases this was under review and changes were

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expected to be announced soon, and in some cases funding had been progressively decreasing over time, therefore changes were not attributed to the EYNFF.

37% identified that less funding was available and/or that funding was not being increased proportionately to cover the needs of children eligible for 30 hours. 8% reported that the administrative processes required to obtain funding were more onerous since the introduction of the EYNFF. Comments in relation to how the current year's SEND funding had worsened compared to previous years included:

- Issues arising in relation to the 30 hours, including where children accessing 30 hours only receive funding for SEN support for equivalent to 15 hours

“The shift in attendance from 15 to 30 hours has changed the nursery day for children with SEN. The LA are still working out how best to support children with SEN who are accessing 30 hours and lunchtime cover is proving to be difficult as outreach staff need a break too! Children with high needs attending over 30 hours are requiring more support to be provided directly from the school as their allocation does not cover the support they need.”

“We have many more SEND children now that are not eligible for a 30 hour place under the new criteria, and we know that this is the biggest benefit to these children in particular. Our TAs previously were able to work solely with 1 child; now most of them are supporting 2 or 3 children at a time. This is due to the cuts in hours and funding for these children. This also means that there is an impact on all children in the nursery.”

- There is no longer any additional funding available for 2-year-olds with SEND in our authority
- We are finding that the panel are awarding SEN funding to fewer children (ie their needs have to be higher). Also, fewer hours are being funded - eg if a child attends for 15 hours, maybe 7.5 or 10 hours support will be provided.
- We used to have a banded system from 1 to 6 for inclusion funding with band 6 providing full-time 1-to-1 support depending on need. This has gone and now there is only mild, moderate or EHC funding available at a much lower rate.
- The systems for applying for funding have changed and we now have different forms to complete which require more evidence of the cycles of support already completed. Funding is allocated on a shorter term basis and requires reapplying for as a means of reviewing the child's progress.
- No increased outreach allocation for 30 hour children
- The authority wants provision to be equitable for PVI's and maintained but has forgotten that schools need a teacher as SENCo and unlike schools who access other SEND funding to part fund a SENCo and other 1-1 staff for maintained nursery schools there is no other funding stream.

Conclusions

These findings suggest there is cause for concern about the sustainability of funding for children with SEND in maintained nursery schools, and that more research is needed to assess the impact of the recent changes - the introduction of the Disability Access Fund and SEND Inclusion Funds – on the ability for children with SEND to access the 2-year-old provision, the universal early education entitlement for 3- to 4-year-olds and the full amount of the 30 hours right across the sector.

The following quotes indicate the importance of ensuring that funding is sufficient for all children with SEND to receive their entitlement to a high quality early childhood education:

“Our outstanding setting has dedicated, well-qualified pro-active and very experienced staff working directly with all children including those with SEND... If this provision were not available families would have no alternative other than to send children to provisions that may not have the level of expertise and teacher directed input necessary to manage their needs.”

“We take the children that are excluded from other settings across the Borough. If we were closed the needs of children would not be met.”

“The school provides specialised family support, specialist provision, early help and assessment. If the Nursery did not undertake the intense work with children and families of children with additional needs, the pressure on primary schools and other services would increase greatly. I believe there would be more family breakdown and social service intervention required.”

“Without this provision more children would fall behind; more would need specialist provision for long periods of time. Early intervention means children are set on a path of success. 100s of parents report the long-term impact on their children's lives of the support offered in nursery. Last year 4 children with EHCP were signed off following support received early on and are achieving well. Without early support the cost of specialist provision would be prohibitive.”

“We are now at breaking point in terms of the quality of service we are providing for SEND children. If further cuts are introduced and there is no sustainable SEND funding then we do not know how we will be able to continue to support the high, middle and low needs that children have. This will further impact on children as they move through the education system.”

Appendix 1 – List of specialist staff qualifications and training mentioned by respondents

- ADHD awareness
- Autism: Cert in Understanding Autism, PGCert/Masters in Autism, Attention for Autism, Autism Education Trust (levels 1-3), Social Communication/Emotional Regulation/Transactional Support (SCERTS), TEACCH, Thomas Training
- Attachment training
- Baby signing, BSL signing, Signalong, Makaton
- Counselling Skills
- Downs Syndrome awareness
- Dyslexia awareness
- Inclusive Classroom Profile
- Independent Parental Special Education Advice (IPSEA) training
- Lifting and assisting
- Medical training to meet needs eg epilepsy awareness, diabetes, peg and gastro, tracheoscopy, specialist medical and feeding interventions
- National SENCo Award and postgraduate degrees in SEN and inclusion (PGCE, MA, etc)
- Nurture Group Training
- Occupational therapy
- Playtherapy/ Therapeutic Play Skills/ theraplay
- Portage training
- Positive handling
- Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) – eg PGCert
- Qualifications in nursing and Health Visiting.
- Rebound Therapy
- Speech & Language Therapy (SALT) qualifications (level 3, degree level)
- Speech and Language other qualifications including Time to Talk , All Aboard, Early Talk Boost, BLAST (Boosting Language, Auditory Skills & Talking), Chatterbox, Early Language Development Programme (ELDP), Early talk boost, Earlybird, ELKLAN, ELSA, Every Child a Talker (ECAT), Derbyshire language scheme, FACT and FACT Plus training, Hanen More Than words training and Teacher Talk, ICAN, Intensive Interaction, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display (PODD) system, Tac Pac, Wellcomm
- Stepping stones (parenting programme)
- Teacher of the visually impaired
- Team Teach
- Visually and hearing impaired training

Appendix 2 – List of accreditations held by respondents

- Achievement for All Quality Mark
- Early Bird support programme (National Autistic Society)
- Early Talk Boost Trainer
- Early Years Quality Mark
- ELKLAN trainer accreditation
- Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) Network registered
- Every Child a Talker (ECAT)
- Hanen language training
- I Can Accreditation and Enhanced Accreditation
- Inclusion Award
- Inclusion Quality Mark (IQM).
- Learning Language & Loving It
- Makaton
- National Portage Association
- Nurture school status
- SENCO accreditation, Centre of excellence
- Stoke speaks out level 4
- Thomas Training
- Warwickshire SEND Accreditation (WinCKs)