SEND Workshop

Thank you to everyone who came to the SEND workshop and shared their experiences, concerns and ideas for reform. Hearing directly from families about where support is working and where it is falling short was invaluable.

Several clear themes ran through the discussion. Families want support put in place as soon as a need is identified, rather than after years of waiting for an assessment or a diagnosis. They want legal timescales to be met and a consistent caseworker who understands their child. They also want suitable provision, from early years through to college, available closer to home, with transport arrangements that reflect their child's needs.

What also came through strongly was that every child and young person is different. Decisions about their support and provision must rest on a proper understanding of their individual needs and circumstances, rather than on budgets or a single approach applied to every child.

I am grateful to everyone who spoke so openly, often about very difficult experiences. I will take the points raised back to Westminster and make sure they inform my ongoing work on SEND, including my conversations with Ministers.

To capture the breadth of the discussion, the feedback has been grouped into the five themes covered on the night. Altogether, 211 individual comments were recorded. Under each theme you will find a summary of what is working, what needs to improve and what a new SEND system must get right. The full record of comments is included in the appendix.

Theme	Positive comments	Areas for improvement	Total
The Current EHCP System and the Proposed Move to ISPs	13	86	**99**
Mainstream Availability and Suitability	13	31	**44**
Availability and Suitability of Transport	7	19	**26**
Early Years Access and Intervention	5	21	**26**
Post 16 Education	1	15	**16**
Total	**39**	**172**	**211**

Theme 1: The Current EHCP System and the Proposed Move to ISPs

Families were clear that the legal standing of an EHCP matters. The right of appeal was described as the one point in the process where parents feel they have real control, and several people said the tribunal was the first body that genuinely listened to them. Some newer applications are moving faster than older ones, and a few schools are making sure annual reviews happen on time by taking the lead themselves.

The great majority of comments, however, described a process that is not working as the law intends. Plans are regularly issued well beyond the 20 week limit. Annual reviews are missed, not recorded, or followed by no changes to the plan, so documents fall years out of date; one parent described the same plan running from 2006 to 2023. Caseworkers change constantly, rarely attend reviews and often have not read the plan. Plans are written in vague terms rather than specific, measurable provision, which parents believe allows schools to avoid delivering support. Even where provision is agreed on paper, it is often not put into practice in the classroom.

Parents also described poor communication between the council, schools, health and social care, with professional advice not making its way into the final plan. Some children are at home with no education despite having an EHCP. Tribunal waits are so long that young people are ageing out before a decision, and families reported outcomes not always being acted upon. There was clear concern that Individual Support Plans would not carry the same legal force.

Key points raised

- Keep the legal right of appeal and access to tribunal, and cut the time it takes to reach a hearing.
- Enforce the statutory timescales for assessments, plans and annual reviews, with real consequences when they are missed.
- Give each family one named caseworker who knows the child and attends their reviews.
- Write plans with specific, measurable provision, and update them properly after every review.
- Join up education, health and social care so that professional advice is reflected in the plan.
- Make sure any new support plan is legally enforceable.

Theme 2: Mainstream Availability and Suitability

There was warm praise for individual teachers. One parent described a single trusted teacher who had transformed their daughter's experience over two years, others said their mainstream school had provided everything their child needed, and outdoor space was valued as a place for children to calm down. Several people stressed that many needs can be met through reasonable adjustments when schools and parents talk to each other, and there was strong support for keeping specialist schools.

The difficulty is that good support depends on luck. Parents described a lack of SEND training among teaching staff, too few teaching assistants and classes too large for children with additional needs to thrive. Reasonable adjustments are refused, dysregulation is treated as bad behaviour, and children spend long periods in time out rooms or are sent home. Some SENCOs want to help but are held back by senior leaders.

A recurring concern was that schools say they cannot meet a child's needs and the council overrules them. Children who are academically able but have social and emotional needs were described as fitting nowhere, too able for specialist provision yet not supported in mainstream. Several parents felt inclusion currently exists only in policy documents and called for more specialist places rather than fewer.

Key points raised

- Make SEND training a core part of every teacher's preparation, with higher level training for SENCOs.
- Fund more teaching assistants and smaller classes where need is greatest.
- Treat dysregulation as an unmet need rather than a behaviour issue.
- Give proper weight to a school's judgement when it says it cannot meet a child's needs.
- Create more specialist places, including suitable provision for able children with social and emotional needs.
- Give SENCOs the authority to put agreed support in place.

Theme 3: Availability and Suitability of Transport

Where transport is in place it generally works well. Taxi and bus drivers were praised for how they care for children, and some families had petrol allowances agreed on their first application.

The problems lie in the gaps and the rules. Some children with specialist placements did not have transport arranged by the first day of term. Funded transport ends at 16 although education continues to 18, and there is no provision for young people aged 19 to 25. Escorts are offered only for medical conditions, not for needs such as ADHD, and a personal assistant was refused for a young person travelling to college. Families must reapply every year, mileage rates are inconsistent and have not kept pace with fuel prices, and transport is only provided to the school named in the plan.

Parents also raised safeguarding concerns about vehicle standards, including a taxi with blacked out windows, and questioned the use of CCTV. Primary age children have been directed to central pick up points rather than collected from home, and one family described a blind 13 year old being expected to walk across an estate to catch a bus.

Key points raised

- Transport arrangements need to be finalised before the start of each school term.
- Base decisions on escorts and travel support on the child's needs, including neurodivergent conditions.
- Extend support to cover education from 16 to 25.
- Review mileage rates regularly and remove the need to reapply each year when circumstances have not changed.
- Set clear safeguarding standards for vehicles and drivers.

Theme 4: Early Years Access and Intervention

Some families had very positive experiences. Early years settings were described as meeting needs better than school, and one school was called amazing for arranging every referral a child needed. Another began an EHCP application before a diagnosis was confirmed. One parent recalled a dedicated assessment centre in Exeter that diagnosed their child at the age of three.

Most comments, however, described long waits for autism and ADHD assessments with no support in the meantime and no clear early intervention pathway. Health visitor contact has become less frequent, and early intervention is only triggered if a health visitor or nursery raises a concern. Girls are frequently missed. Parents reported dismissive comments from staff, including being told a child was going through a phase, was copying other children, or was too young to assess, and one was told she was wasting her time seeking an assessment.

Parents also said that support can be withdrawn at the first sign of progress, that a diagnosis does not always lead to help, and that some families rely entirely on local voluntary groups. The system overall was described as too complex to navigate.

Key points raised

- Create a clear early intervention pathway where support begins when a need is identified, not when a diagnosis arrives.
- Reduce waiting times for autism and ADHD assessments.
- Train health visitors, nursery and reception staff to recognise early signs of need, including masking in girls.
- Make sure health visitors carry out all scheduled checks.
- Take parents' concerns seriously from the start.

Theme 5: Post 16 Education

The one positive point recorded was that young people's own views are being taken into account, with one child feeling heard for the first time. Access to Exeter College and Bicton was also described as good.

Beyond that, parents described very limited options after school. Preparation for adulthood, which should begin in Year 9, is not happening in practice, and transitions are not planned. The closure of sixth forms means autistic young people are being moved into large colleges they find overwhelming, losing settings that were safe and familiar. For young people with severe needs, parents said there is only one suitable college in Exeter.

One family was told by a college SENCO that their child should be independent at 18 despite having an EHCP. Parents reported no specialist support for blind students in later years, little help for young people struggling at college, and no consistent member of staff to speak to.

Key points raised

- Make sure EHCPs are honoured in full up to the age of 25.
- Start preparation for adulthood in Year 9, with properly planned transitions.
- Expand local post 16 options, including smaller settings and provision for severe needs.
- Give families a consistent point of contact at college.
- Align transport support with post 16 education so it does not stop at the point provision becomes harder to reach.

Conclusion

The workshop showed both the dedication of many people working in SEND services and the considerable pressure facing children, young people and their families. Across all five themes, the same messages came through consistently. Families want support to start earlier, communication to be clearer and the professionals working with their child to stay the same. They want suitable provision available closer to home, and confidence that the rights their children already have will be upheld.

Above all, families want a SEND system built around the needs of each individual child or young person, one that allows them to spend less time navigating processes and more time supporting their children. That is the test any reform must meet, and it is the standard I will continue to press for.

Appendix: Full List of Comments by Theme

The following is the record of comments made at the meeting, grouped by theme and by whether they were raised as a positive or a concern.

Theme 1: The Current EHCP System and the Proposed Move to ISPs

Positive (13)

- The right to appeal at tribunal must be kept
- Most appeals go in favour of parents.
- We have had annual reviews take place in time because the school instigate it.
- New applications are dealt with quicker than old
- Help from Rovick???
- Mixed picture regarding time frames newer applications are going through quicker, with other stuck in the system
- The X School has good transition from no education into education
- Tailored timetable to each student at X school
- We have some lovely teachers at X although some staff especially SLT think they know more than the parent
- EHCP review in transition year was thorough and my thoughts were actually listened to
- Actual SEND tribunal listened to me and was cross with the Council
- EHCPs are legally binding and tribunals are a current option so parents do have some control. This should be protected.
- Primary schools are great with kids individual needs – I have found.

Areas for improvement (86)

- Schools (Secondary, ECC) will agree to provision however, they will never put the plan in day to day life. They do not communicate with each other (teacher to teacher to parent)
- They ECHP expect too much – the targets one way to high
- Communication between schools and councils are non existent. When a head teacher thinks they know best
- Lack of meetings
- Lack of resources
- Need more dyslexia assessments
- Parents aren't believed – masking
- Council do not attend annual reviews
- No communication from Council
- No direct case officer
- Protect the tribunal process, but improve it
- Not enough consistency in case workers and a severe lack of communication.
- Not enough low level support
- Despite overwhelming evidence, LA's are refusing to issue EHCPS
- Tribunal waiting times too long and if they go in favour of parents anyway it is a waste of time and money.
- Timescales are very past deadlines
- The Local Authority feel untouchable / not accountable to anyone
- Case workers keep changing
- Strongly believe LA just want to delay to avoid cost
- Assessment of needs, must be streamlined & whole process

- Delays in EHCP process are meaning peoples education and future employment opportunities are lost
- X Schools SLT don't like listening to the parent
- My child feels like he is not being listened to
- X schools SENDCO not supporting SEND children until they harm themselves
- The school has said they can not help with the EHCP process only write a report which leaves parents struggle who have SEND themselves
- Failings from Sendco and social care to support the child needs leading to the education psychology report not fit for purpose
- Not having the evidence from professionals due to a lack of communication to support the EHCP – ie. Doctors, social care = DCC
- It's the support that is included in the evidence for an EHCP from X School not having the Sendco on side until its too late
- EHCP – so far no caseworker has attended for annual review
- Annual review – no changes made – not acceptable – makes them as useful as a choc fireguard
- ETOAS – too hard to obtain, falls to the parent to cost and prove benefits.
- Provisions get changed with no communication to parents
- Education and social services are not working as a team – it needs to be joined up
- Funding gets cut with no notice – causes meltdowns from child
- When education placement fails causes parents to leave the work force and causes immense family stress.
- School trauma is not factored
- Too many schools tried turns students off education
- My child is not a budget. Money is put above child's needs
- Support went down when EHCPs Started
- Targets are not 'smart' & vague so schools can avoid providing correct level of support
- Local Authority do not update EHCP after annual reviews meaning the document is out of date.
- Timescales are rarely/ never met by the LA or they finalise an incomplete EHCP instead
- Staff at schools are not properly trained to carry out annual reviews
- EHCPS are not working – timescale not withheld at everystage
- Staff at the DCC and schools not aware of the law and use policies to their own advantage
- Annual reviews are not actually annual
- Child turned 18 + LA and college suggesting the child should be independent
- Caseworkers never the same and change constantly and don't understand the plan or read it
- Parents are the experts by schools and DCC think otherwise
- Child treated as no or cast rather than individual
- Huge delays in EHCP issue and review
- EHCP vague and not smart
- EHCP completely ignored by school
- Huge discrepancies between standards of support between primary and secondary school
- Lack of education psychologists availability
- Parent views disregardsed
- Draft plans kept the same despite comments being sent back
- Not 'bad' enough for specialist but mainstream can't properly meet needs
- Schools say they can't meet needs – DCC overrule
- Academic children with social and emotional needs don't fit anywhere

- More specialist options needed
- Constant change of caseworkers at DCC
- Tribunal timelines are too long so children and young people are aging out
- Tribunal outcomes ignored by DCC
- DCC do not communicate
- Children and young people are stuck at home witwh no education even with an EHCP
- School staff and local authority staff do not know the law
- EHCPs are not Smart
- EHCP timescales are not met
- Constistently over 20 weeks
- Reviews are not done on time
- No consitiency with caseworker
- ISP will not be legally enforceable
- Local authority is not following the law
- There's no clear guidelines on their procedures
- Local authority is not responding to parents concerns or complaints
- The annual review is not recorded anywhere on the EHCP
- My daughter's first plan was in 2006 and we haven't had nay changes until 2023 with a new plan
- Delays with everything even within children are in crisis
- No consequence to DCC when they don't follow correct processes
- EHCP process is to slow and not consistent and its finding under resourced to fully commit to the need
- Not reviewed yearly
- Refused review because of no professional evidence
- Refused to amend when EHCP extremely out of date
- Even when agreed not what annual report said
- All documents not used in EHCP – professionals give advice – not input to EHCP therefore not accurate

Theme 2: Mainstream Availability and Suitability

Positive (13)

- My child had a statement (before EHCP) from age 3 – back then provision was amazing
- Some individual school staff are brilliant but it is potluck
- Depends on the childs needs. Many can be met if parents discuss needs and can come under "reasonable adjustement"
- Some staff are understanding but only because they are passionate about supporting. But don't know what they can do
- Every teacher in every mainstream school should be fully trained to deal with our new world or neurodiverse needs
- The one trusted teacher who has supported my daughter for two years, who get her, who she loves the way he teaches and has ADHD/autism
- Outdoor space is great and useful for de-escalation
- Teachers care
- Teachers/ sendcos want to help but are tied by rules
- Keep specialist SEND schools
- It was through my son's mainstream school that we have had all the help he has needed

- They've adapted as best they can & have always been honest in terms of help
- Willingness from teaches to help, byt serious lack of knowledge and experience with SEN they need training and support

Areas for improvement (31)

- Staff are not trained – enough
- Sensory breaks as a group
- No funding
- School pushing parent away ignoring the problem
- Training, staffing, no mainstream locally meet the needs of children with SEND
- Understanding that every child is different not cookie cutter which is how mainstream is currently
- School are not inclusive
- This has got worse
- SEND children spend more time in "time out" rooms
- Children are not hitting their targets with an EHCP
- Neither of my children were able to access education full time by end of year 11
- School staff aren't trained in SEND
- Effective inclusion would meet needs. Staff trained appropriately and Senco would have higher level of training
- Inclusion should be default a child is an individual
- Staff are not trained
- Reasonable adjustments are refused (multiple schools)
- Violent children cannot go to mainstream
- Mainstream too many kids per class for SEN to thrive
- Staff training
- Staff are poorly trained and poorly paid for wat they do
- Son started secondary school in September – EHCP ignored – needs not being met and is now bulled
- Inclusion is not happening its just a word in a policy
- Schools say can't meet needs – council overrule
- Not enough TA's and support staff
- Huge lack of training in SEND for teaching staff
- Parents are expert's in their own children but schools think they know best
- Senco's are stopped from putting support in place by SLT
- Children with social/ emotional support don't fit anywhere
- More specialist schools needed not less
- Dysregulation treated as behaviour
- Child sent home every time we he gets dysregulation

Theme 3: Availability and Suitability of Transport

Positive (7)

- Taxi drivers for SEN kids are very good with them.
- Experiences of bus drivers are good.
- Request of petrol allowance in first time applying was achieved.
- Transport was funded to named school.

- Transport works very well for primary and secondary school.
- SEND school is working for boys.
- Aiming's at mainstream school for girls next year (both are needed).

Areas for improvement (19)

- Theres no transport for special needs education post 19 up to 25.
- Transport cost varies from family to family. Reapplication every year.
- Transport funding reduced in 2026 from 2025 even with fuel prices going up.
- Parents are not getting transport in place by 1st day of school term with children requiring specialist provision.
- Transport won't give 1-1 for transport for children requiring a PA to travel at college. Poor excuse was that it's only for under 16.
- Transport is not given unless the school is named on EHCP. High cost and takes time.
- CCTV has been illegally installed.
- There was an inappropriate taxi which had blacked out windows and seats facing each other.
- A taxi driver was late.
- Children only able to have an escort if they have medical condition not ADHD.
- Primary aged children told to a centralised point rather than collecting at home.
- Need for escorts with the taxis for SEND children
- Transportation is difficult for children to attend school even when child is blind.
- Free school transport ends at 16 years old but education ends at 18. It should be funded.
- Local authority buses were seen with only one person inside, refusing to help others get on.
- Inconsistent mileage costs.
- How can a D.C.C expect a naturally blind 13-year-old to walk across the estate and catch a bus to get to school. Why is there an appeal stage when filled?
- Some parents left with no options as child won't get into a taxi by themselves.
- DDC haven't updated the mileage rate.

Theme 4: Early Years Access and Intervention

Positive (5)

- Early years have met my children's needs better than school. They provide support if children have diagnosis.
- There was a centre called 'honey land' where children can be assessed in Exeter which helped diagnose a child aged 3 in 2006.
- The early intervention team will be involved but only if health visitors or nurseries have identified concerns.
- A school recognised a child's needs were different and organised all referrals needed to help the children. The school were 'amazing'. School is always supporting the child to make sure his school experience was good.
- School were swift and efficient in placing support for children who may have had ASD and started EHOP application before diagnosis.

Areas for improvement (21)

- Waiting was too long for assessment for ASD and ADHD. No support while waiting for assessment as well. There was no early intervention pathway.
- The SEND system is too complex and confuses parents about social care support.
- Health visitors are less frequent now and rarely pick up SEND needs.
- School SEND said, 'we have to be careful who we support autism referral for everyone wants their child to be autistic.'

- School showed lack of support for referral for assessment for child who had ASD in reception.
- Girls who later get diagnosed get missed in early years.
- Parents concern sometimes ignored at early ages of children.
- Little support shown by schools. 'Don't get obsessed at early years-e.g. ADHD is 6-8 years plus.
- The SENCo at X School told a parent that she was wasting her time having her child assessed.
- School was quite rude to parent when leaving-no communication at the door after school.
- School claimed to a later diagnosed child 'it's just a phase' early on. Poor support.
- Parent claimed support is from a local voluntary group only.
- Difficulties with diagnosis for ADHD and autism before 8.
- Schools claim how you don't need diagnosis to acquire help but according to some this is not true.
- Parents sometimes get very frustrated to get needs of their child recognised.
- No help given to their child after they have diagnosis noted by one parent.
- Health visitors do not do all the visits that are supposed to do.
- School has told a child that they are 'copying' and 'echoing' certain behaviour they see from other children.
- Insufficient staff to see/observe every child.
- Staff may refer to a child, however, may also clear the child from support if they notice any positive behaviour.
- Some children are being refused for help/EHCP due to age, if they are too young some staff claim they are 'late learners.

Theme 5: Post 16 Education

Positive (1)

- Children's views are taken on board. Child feels heard for once.

Areas for improvement (15)

- Few options for post school.
- ECHP not being followed. One Child when they turned 18, the college SENCO told parents that their child should be independent.
- One child claim 'there's no help for me to learn' post 18.
- A child with ASD couldn't manage college and received little help for his struggles.
- Lack of support for preparations into adulthood in year 9.
- Post 16 EOTISC and general safeguarding is insufficient to meet the needs for children.
- The closure of sixth form mean autistic children are pushed into mainstream involving colleges that are too overwhelming for them. Safe and familiar schools in sixth form have been stripped away.
- There is no support available for blind children in later years of school.
- More opportunities are required. Limited options (although access at Exeter college and Bricton are good).
- Nurseries showed a lack of concern towards children they suspected having potential diagnosis- dismissed for 2 years.
- No preparation for adulthood. No easy transitions.
- Theres no future education for children with severe special needs in Exeter. Only one college for it: InFocus.
- Parents are unable to talk to the same staff member about issues.
- GP request for referrals of young patients for early support before problems escalate.
- There isn't any obvious provision for referral services.