



Practice Notes: Supporting inclusion in mainstream settings

October 2024



About this resource

What is the purpose of this document?

This resource is informed by evidence gathered by the Department for Education through the Change Programme, drawing on learning from a series of workshops and detailed ‘deep dives’ with Lead Local Authorities and schools involved in the Change Programme Partnerships (CPPs).

The practice notes incorporate insights from this evidence, alongside learning from the Change Programme and the wider evidence base from the What Works in SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework.

This product has been created by the REACH consortium in partnership with the Department for Education. This product contains emerging insights and learning from the Change Programme and should not be regarded as official government policy or guidance. You can read more about the Change Programme [here](#).

Introduction: Overview

What does this document include?

This series of practice notes include:

-  Key insights on supporting inclusion in mainstream settings
-  Practice note 1: Leadership, accountability and measuring progress
-  Practice note 2: Partnership, outreach and networking – Building a team around the school
-  What do we know? Local SEND cluster models and local authority Inclusion Support Services foster learning and a collective responsibility for SEND, improving identification of need
-  Practice note 3: Supporting the skills of the workforce
-  Practice note 4: Creating new ways to manage budgets, resources and people

Key Insights: Supporting inclusion in mainstream settings

Why this reform?

Department for Education (DfE) want to improve early identification of needs and intervention and set out clear expectations for the types of support that should be ordinarily available in mainstream settings.

What are we testing?

This reform has covered:

- Gathering insight into good quality Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP)
- Exploring how setting national expectations for mainstream leaders will operate to ensure best practice is delivered.

What does good look like?



School leaders' **buy-in, knowledge and experience of SEND**, including a clear shared definition of inclusion, is vital for ensuring schools can provide what is set out in the local offer.



Strong partnership working via robust SEND & Alternative Provision (AP) Partnership Boards and strong relationships with schools, both Multi-Academy Trusts and maintained, underpinned by a shared vision of inclusion, consistent communications, and involving school leaders in strategic conversations and initiatives.



Training and workforce development ensuring consistency of inclusive mainstream practice and overcoming current challenges around recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce.



Peer to peer support and the role of SENCO network groups in ensuring schools share best practice across mainstream, AP and specialist provision, and consistently meet expectations around inclusion.



Robust team around the school model with sufficient universal and targeted support including AP and ELSEC.



Co-production with all stakeholders on local offer and Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP) documents, and close working relationships with parent carer and children and young people voice groups.

Implementation challenges:



Change Programme Partnerships (CPPs) including schools have identified the following significant challenges to overcome when implementing inclusive practice/provision:



Lack of clarity and a shared ambition with schools and settings coupled with a lack of clear accountability for providing high quality support and provision to meet SEND needs in mainstream settings.



No consistent approach for measuring progress for disabled children and those with SEN. Progress not monitored in the same way, meaning opportunities are missed to bridge the gap.



Ineffective partnership, outreach and networking approaches.



Insufficient universal and targeted support for schools to draw on.



Funding and capacity pressures including recruitment and retention of a skilled and confident workforce.

These key insights have been expanded upon in the below Practice Notes from experiences and examples shared by the Change Programme Partnerships (CPPs) and schools.

Practice note 1: Leadership, accountability and measuring progress

The challenge: During the DfE deep dives and in response to a recent survey of CPPs, schools and local authorities reported that the lack of a whole school approach to meeting a range of needs and no consistent national approaches for measuring the progress for disabled children and young people and those with SEN increases the attainment gap and leads to missed opportunities. LAs told us that accountability mechanisms and measures, such as Ofsted and progress 8, coupled with a perception that inclusive practice may result in a decline in academic standards can lead to pressures on school leaders to focus on other priorities.



“[We] aim for ‘flexible consistency’ when meeting the needs of pupils to keep children in the setting and to create a sense of belonging for all pupils.” - SENCO



Value inclusion and balance high expectations for all

In a recent survey of CPPs, 60% of respondents felt there is an emphasis on attainment over inclusion. Findings from the recent DfE deep dives in schools and local areas identified approaches that can support a focus on inclusion:

- **Local areas** co-produce with leaders and stakeholders a **strong inclusive leadership ambition**, so every leader knows what good looks like.
- **Local authority sets the vision for inclusion and monitor school’s uptake of local offer.** Supporting schools to embed the vision in standard practice.
- **Headteachers** can seek opportunities to improve their understanding of SEND by **forming working relationships with APs and special schools** in the area and access training courses for further leadership development.
- **Whole school approaches to embed consistency** of teaching and learning routines. Close monitoring of curriculum delivery through learning walks, observations, performance data.
- **School leaders can reduce their usage of permanent exclusions** and part-time timetables and seek external support for children with high needs. This can be supported by **local authorities developing strategies to reduce the need for permanent exclusions**, by strengthening the Early



The role of the SENCO

Investment in the SENCO role is critical to embedding a whole school approach to inclusion:

- SENCOs should be part of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) with an active role in decision-making, they should have access to budgets and input into where and how budgets are to be spent.
- **Leaders can prioritise time, funding and training for their SENCOs** ensuring they are supported and given enough time to focus on SEND e.g. mapping the support offer and areas where the school could improve outreach e.g. reaching out to special schools/APs, bringing staff in to support teachers and empower teaching staff to attend training.
- There should be SENCO involvement in curriculum planning, timetabling, environment, policies and core routines.
- Schools should have flexible curriculums with options that allow all children to succeed.

In a **Telford** primary school, two SENCOs support students and staff to embed inclusion policies. They worked closely with SLT on all policy decisions, strengthening a whole school approach. One SENCO is based outside of the classroom full time and also acts as a consultant for different schools in the area, sharing and bringing back expertise. The two-SENCO model allows for shared responsibilities and provides extra capacity in identifying and supporting children with SEND.



Quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation processes

Almost all respondents (96%) to a recent Feedback Loop survey reported strengthened accountability as a critical enabler for ensuring the success and consistency of inclusive practice. Quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation of inclusive practice is essential to support schools to identify priorities, strengths and areas for development – setting high expectations for inclusive excellence. This provided SENCOs with data and a developing evidence base for their role as well as providing parent carers with more confidence that mainstream settings can meet their child’s needs. **Local authorities can introduce frameworks to hold education settings to account.**

East Sussex have developed the Quality Mark for Inclusion (ESQMI) - schools use it to evaluate the quality of their inclusive practice. The submission process enables SENCOs and leadership to see areas of strength and areas for development, providing a basis for continuous improvement of inclusive practice across the region.

Leicester’s Best Endeavours and Reasonable Adjustments (BERA) framework is an auditing tool for whole school provision, ensuring all children and young people with SEND have the right provision at school and receive an education that prioritises inclusion.

Practice note 2: Partnership, outreach and networking – Building a team around the school

The challenge: Findings from the DfE deep dives and Feedback Loop survey indicate that poor relationships between local authorities, schools and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) can make it more challenging to collaborate and share resources. Limited capacity within schools can prevent leaders being unable to engage in outreach with special schools and APs and from utilising the local offer. During the DfE deep dive school visits, many said funding and capacity constraints restrict them from creating a ‘team around the child’, similarly a ‘team around the school’ is often not readily available owing to insufficient universal and targeted support for schools to draw on or long waiting times.



Strong relationships with schools and school leaders buy-in

In a recent survey of CPPs, 78% agreed partnership working is key to improving outcomes and said that this is particularly important with MATs. Local authorities must have a strong ambition and model for inclusion, and all schools must work well together to deliver the local authority ambition. Forging strong relationships with schools, clarity of objectives and consistent communication are key to ensuring school leaders’ buy-in, underpinned by a shared vision of inclusion. Local authorities can support schools in building partnerships coupled with schools reviewing stakeholder representation, including parent carers on decision-making groups. In **Barnet**, a school SENCO works once a week in the local authority Inclusion Team; and as part of their broader inclusion role, is able to share good practice across a range of settings. In **Portsmouth**, the education partnership system.



“Partnership is the way forward, we can both support each other and hold each other to account to create a more inclusive system”

- Headteacher, Hartlepool Primary School



Create networks and groups within and outside of school

Peer to peer support via SENCO network groups and school partnerships is key to ensuring settings share best practice across mainstream, AP and specialist provision, and meet expectations around inclusive practice in a consistent way. Findings from the DfE deep dives in schools saw leaders constantly learning from outside expertise and bringing that expertise back into their setting. These schools have also developed strong and effective relationships between SENCOs, Curriculum Leads and Pastoral leads. **To support schools, local authorities can set up networks and clusters** between mainstream and specialist settings for school leaders to upskill and discuss inclusive practice in their settings.

Leeds current fund Area Inclusion Partnerships (AIP) – local groups of schools working together to provide Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) outreach, coaching support, and brokering AP for children and young people vulnerable to exclusion or disengagement. Almost every school in Leeds belongs to an AIP, and the innovative approach has contributed to Leeds’s very low levels of permanent exclusion.



Team around the school

The DfE deep dives found that where local authority multi-agency ‘team around the school’ services were at capacity, schools sought alternative help to bring into school - either via the Local Offer or through services intentionally created around the school. Approaches that can support a ‘team around the school’ include:

- **Schools prioritising outreach** and understanding what is available both within and outside of the local offer for supporting the needs of the school.
- **Local authorities can generate SENCO outreach forums** enabling experienced SENCOs to support early career SENCOs in establishing ‘teams around the school’.

Bedford piloted a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) model co-located in 20 school settings. The impact of this model is to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND via earlier identification of need, centralised and integrated decision-making, improved local relationships and increased capacity within settings.

What do we know? Local SEND cluster models and local authority Inclusion Support Services foster learning and a collective responsibility for SEND, improving identification of need

Findings from the Change Programme build on existing evidence in relation to inclusive practice and inclusion as set out in the What Works in SEND effective practice evidence framework. There is specific learning in relation to the impact of school-led SEND cluster models and the role of Local Authority Inclusion Support Services.

South Gloucestershire developed a school-led SEND cluster model for children and young people at SEN support. The SEND cluster model aimed to:



Strengthen leadership and shared ownership of SEND priorities by all partners, but specifically including schools;



Improve joint commissioning and access to evidence-based interventions for children and young people requiring SEN support, that was not dependent on having an EHCP or a specific diagnosis;



Encourage earlier and accurate identification of need, by building capacity, knowledge and skills in schools; and



Embedding a culture of inclusion, by fostering sustainable, whole-school approaches and improving outcomes for disabled children and young people and those with SEN.

The SEND clusters have encouraged greater understanding, improved identification and collective responsibility for disabled children and young people and those with SEN, including on the part of mainstream schools.

The What Works in SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that the 'strength of evidence' is **promising** and 'breadth of impact' is **emerging** - there is evidence of impact from practitioners involved with the clusters, and some evidence of improving outcomes for children and young people.

See full case study [here](#)

Herefordshire rolled out a new multi-faceted, whole-system approach to SEN and inclusion support in the early years which aimed to provide holistic, joined-up, wraparound support so that children did not fall between different services. Their aims were:

- timely and accurate identification of need;
- that early years settings were supported, trained and skilled in providing effective support to disabled children and those with SEN; and
- effective transition from the early years to primary school.

In 2020, the number of children in Reception who received EHCPs who were previously known to the Early Years Inclusion Service was 43%. This rose to 92% in 2021 and was 100% during the 2022/23 academic year. Effective support in early years settings has seen an increasing number of children make the transition to mainstream school without needing an EHCP. Of the children known to the Early Years Inclusion Service in 2021, 21% moved to mainstream school without an EHCP, whereas in 2023 this had increased to 39%. Increasing numbers of children with EHCPs are moving from early years into a mainstream school, reflecting parents' and practitioners' confidence in the support the child has received before, during and after the transition process.

The What Works in SEND Effective Practice Evidence Framework considers that both the "strength of evidence" and 'breadth of impact' of this case study is **promising**.

See full case study [here](#)

Practice note 3: Supporting the skills of the workforce

The challenge: During the DfE deep dives and in response to a recent survey of CPPs, schools and local authorities reported that recruitment and retention challenges, inconsistent monitoring of training needs, variable transition arrangements and poor co-ordination between professionals result in decreased parental confidence in mainstream settings identifying and meeting a child or young persons' needs. A skilled and confident workforce is vital to facilitate better understanding of inclusion, SEND and the expectations on mainstream settings including all teachers.



Training and workforce development

Almost all survey respondents (96%) reported improving the workforce as a critical enabler. School staff should feel supported, and trust that leaders will bring in further expertise and find solutions together. Local areas can strengthen the training offer to increase knowledge of SEND and set clear expectations around inclusive practice and inclusion for school staff, NHS colleagues, and health and care practitioners and leaders. The DfE deep dives in schools, and local areas at the recent Practice Sharing Forum (PSF) identified approaches to support the skills of the workforce:

- **Local authorities can utilise School Improvement Services** to support schools in monitoring training needs and impact and support them to address barriers to inclusive practice and progress.
- **Schools can create mentoring or coaching programmes** to upskill staff.
- **Schools can support curriculum leads to share inclusive practice and interventions** and establish whole school core routines and approaches.

Rochdale have appointed a Designated Education Officer (DEO) to oversee the facilitation of SEND support in the borough. The DEO will also strengthen workforce development initiatives for schools, specifically focusing on Inclusive Mainstream Provision and SEN support.



Improving knowledge of SEND

In findings from the DfE deep dives in schools, there was an emphasis on the child's whole life including both their experiences outside of school as well as effective planning to prepare them for adulthood. Most schools explored what might be preventing a child from accessing and thriving in a mainstream setting. These schools treated the social, emotional and academic needs of the child with the same importance.

Luton is focusing on developing the graduated response for SEMH needs in mainstream provision as part of their SEMH strategy. They funded 'Therapeutic Thinking Training' for all schools that provides a relationship-based trauma informed approach to behaviour and is part of the universal offer to strengthen inclusive practice.

Schools demonstrated clear ambition, and collaborative problem-solving underpinned by whole school provision. SENCOs also implemented consistent transition models – assessing interventions, understanding if they built towards independence, and planning with teachers for high expectations for pupils. This approach increased parental engagement and confidence.

To strengthen inclusive practice, a secondary school in **Portsmouth** has recruited a primary school teacher to extend their teaching and learning approaches. They match pupils with identified needs in year 6 with experienced staff in year 7 to ensure that appropriate provision is put in place and needs do not escalate because of the move to secondary school.



Peer support

The DfE deep dives found that several schools judge their success on their ability to keep pupils in school and how they enable them to progress and thrive. They judge success on attitudes towards exclusion, off rolling and part-time timetables, and work in clusters to reduce this together. Findings from the DfE deep dives in schools identified approaches that can support peer review:

- **Local authorities can establish peer review networks** between schools enabling peer assessment and cluster moderation to provide support and accountability for inclusive practice.
- **Headteachers and/or SENCO networks** could lead, or support, SEND and inclusion peer reviews of local schools with reports being produced and shared to identify strengths and areas of practice that need improvement.

To strengthen accountability for inclusive practice **Telford and Wrekin's** school-led forum provides support and challenge for schools around provision and practice for disabled children and young people and those with SEN. Experienced SENCOs also support other schools with self-evaluation of provision and it is reported as a "big cultural shift" in getting schools to function under one common vision.

Practice note 4: Creating new ways to manage budgets, resources and people

The challenge: Findings from the DfE deep dives in schools and the Feedback Loop survey indicate both local authorities and schools find it difficult to plan strategically for the longer-term due to lack of funding, and that short-term ‘firefighting’ in the system prevents longer term strategic planning and resource allocation. Although interventions are being implemented, there is inconsistent monitoring thus resources are not always utilised effectively.



Prioritise long-term over short-term

In a recent survey of CPPs, 77% reported funding and resources as a key barrier to implementing inclusive practice and felt it was a barrier to improving outcomes for children and young people. The DfE deep dives identified school approaches to support long-term planning:

- **Several schools planned strategically for cohorts of pupils** long-term rather than on a short-term individual basis - with some pooling notional and top up funding, schools can prepare resourcing where needs are ‘predictable and exceptional’ for example, where there is a consistent proportion of pupils with specific needs in reception cohorts yearly.
- **Local authority School Improvement Services can support schools in identifying what resources are needed enabling them to be deployed more effectively.**
- **School leaders** should evaluate interventions for effectiveness as well as considering staff experience.

School leaders can also refer to the Education Endowment Fund and Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) to implement evidence-based interventions such as those included in the [EIF guidebook](#).



“Our aim is to keep children in the classroom so have developed quiet areas, use THRIVE approach, sensory spaces – and if not in classroom, always within sightline.” Wakefield Primary School - SENCO



Creative use of existing resources

The DfE deep dives in schools found that some have created school clusters to pool resources and share spaces. Schools created commissioning strategies for individual and clusters of schools to support children most in need, for example sharing resources to support a child with emotionally-based school avoidance in mainstream settings. Others were creative with the use of what they had available, constantly adjusting their resources to prioritise school inclusion, and utilising the resources available to them through the Local Offer.

Similarly, schools can review how the building is being used and explore opportunities to create new experiences using the resources they have.

In **Manchester**, one school shares its inclusive outdoor learning spaces with other schools, supports SENCOs and works closely with the local authority to develop Inclusion policy across the local area. As a result, a greater number of pupils benefit from inclusion despite limited resources.

Careful allocation of staff time is also critical to the effectiveness of intervention. The DfE deep dives identified school approaches to support such as the most experienced school staff being matched to pupils with the highest needs and Teaching Assistants (Tas) being assigned to groups of children with similar needs.



Develop creative needs-led provision and utilise outreach

Findings from the DfE deep dives, supported by insights gathered from CPPs in the recent Feedback Loop survey highlighted that many schools create or fund their own on-site Alternative Provision, nurture groups, Speech and Language Therapy sessions, Occupational Therapy and autism support, rather than waiting for NHS placements or therapies. Schools utilise voluntary and community sector and other additional services for support as well as reaching out to special schools and Alternative Provision to share resource.

To support a greater number of pupils with additional needs to receive education in a mainstream setting, a Secondary Headteacher in **Wakefield** has developed a nurture curriculum throughout their school. A smaller, additional teaching group enables a class of 13 - 15 students in each year to benefit from a higher adult to student ratio, and a curriculum which is equitable in breadth and challenge but carefully scaffolded in its delivery.

A secondary school in **Portsmouth** ensures curriculum delivery addresses gaps in learning and the development of key skills for all pupils. Enhanced support includes the Mental Health in Schools Team, Family Support and enrichment activities e.g. animal care as well as investment in well-resourced staff hubs and an onsite Inclusion Centre to meet additional needs of pupils.