



All Party Parliamentary Group for Nursery Schools, Nursery and Reception Classes

Early Education
The British Association for Early Childhood Education

Maintained nursery schools and children with SEND: the impact of the pandemic, June 2021

Executive Summary

A survey of maintained nursery schools carried out by Early Education in June 2021 has found increasing demand from children with SEND in the current school year, or for September entry. However, funding constraints were expected to affect most schools' ability to support children with SEND in due to additional funding for children with SEND having reduced or being harder to obtain (41%), staff cuts being made as a consequence of schools' wider financial difficulties (36%) and cuts made by local authorities to funding for specialist provision/reserved places/assessment centres (17%). Only just over a quarter (26%) of schools said their ability to accept children with SEND was unaffected by funding constraints in the current or next school year. Even those who were able to accept as many children with SEND warned that funding constraints and staff cuts were having an impact on quality or that they had taken a decision not to turn away children with SEND despite the impact on staff.

The situation was summed up by one respondent as follows:

A real value reduction in our overall funding means that we have had to reduce our overall staffing budget. This, coupled with the difficulty of acquiring LA funding for individual children with SEND, will mean that we are unable to accommodate the same number of children that we have historically. We know that there are a significant number of children with SEND in our locality that other EY settings have not been able to accommodate due to the complexity of their needs. Previously, we have been able to accept a good number of these. However, we are unlikely to be able to manage this safely this coming year so will have to restrict the number of spaces we will be able to offer.

All this impacts on children's life chances, will mean increased costs for the Exchequer when early intervention opportunities are missed, and will have knock-on effects for the primary and special schools as children move on to the next phase.

There is an urgent need to increase the amount and allocation of high needs funding in the early years, and to put in place the long-promised long-term funding formula for maintained nursery schools which is needed to allow them to provide support to high numbers of children with SEND who would otherwise have nowhere else to go.

Background to the survey

Maintained nursery schools have high levels of expertise in supporting children with SEND and the proportion of children with SEND whom they support is well above the sector average. They also tend to admit children with complex needs whom other settings are unable to support. However, the [financial impact of the pandemic, on top of long-term underfunding](#), are threatening their capacity to continue this vital work, raising the risk of increasing the number of children with SEND unable to secure a suitable early years place. At the same time, headteachers reporting rising numbers of children with SEND who have additionally been impacted by the pandemic, creating greater pressure on an early years system which has long struggled to provide enough places for children with SEND. We carried out a follow up to our earlier survey to gauge the extent of the problem.

Children with SEND in nursery schools

The survey of maintained nursery schools carried out by Early Education in June 2021 received 101 responses. These schools had a total of 1445 children on SEND support. They had funding to support 197 children through the process of applying for an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP), but were supporting another 385 through the process without any additional funding, despite the extremely time consuming nature of the process and the need to provide specialist support to children during this time without any additional funding.

In addition, 26 of the schools were providing a total of 299 places in specialist provision; 12 offered a total of 45 reserved places and 3 offered a total 25 places in assessment centres. These arrangements provide stability which allows nursery schools to retain expert, specialist staff and make sense in a context for maintained nursery schools which consistently have a higher than average proportion of children with SEND, but are regrettably not widespread.

In the majority of cases, funding for children with SEND has to be applied for in relation to each child, creating uncertainty and extra workload. Just under half of respondents (49%) expected to have the same number of places for children with SEND next year as this year, 13% expected more places, 10% expected fewer and 28% were uncertain.

Despite the concentration of SEND expertise in nursery schools, only 12% reported that their local authority commissioned them to support other providers.

The growth in demand post-pandemic

The survey found that 91% of respondents had seen increasing demand from children with SEND in the current school year, or for September entry. 7% reported no change. No schools reported a decrease in demand.

Multiple factors were causing the rise:

- Increased incidence of SEND in the age group (76%)
- Increased numbers of children with early identification of SEND (68%)
- Increased referrals from health and other services (62%) – although 24% reported decreased referrals due to lack of support services during the pandemic
- Increased complexity of children's needs (62%)
- Children deferring YR or Y1 places because of lack of suitable school places (47%)
- Private and voluntary sector providers (PVIs) referring more children they are unable to support (41%)

Schools reported expecting changes to the number of children with SEND and their needs to have been affected by:

- More children having missed early intervention and support during the pandemic (98%)
- More children with undiagnosed SEND (91%)
- Children affected by reduced support from health/other services (91%)
- Higher levels of mental health problems and anxiety (67%)
- Possible misdiagnosis of SEND due to children's missed experiences during lockdown (55%)
- Long Covid or other direct results of children having contracted Covid (10%)
- Other factors including higher levels of parental anxiety/mental ill health, higher incidence of adverse childhood experiences and misdiagnosis due to virtual appointments with health and other professionals.

The impact of funding cuts

Despite this increase in demand and in the complexity of needs, funding constraints were expected to affect most schools' ability to support children with SEND in due to:

- additional funding for children with SEND having reduced or being harder to obtain (41%)
- staff cuts (36%)
- cuts to funding for specialist provision/reserved places/assessment centres (17%)

Only just over a quarter (26%) of schools said their ability to accept children with SEND was unaffected by funding constraints in the current or next school year, and some of those commented on the impact on quality or that they had taken a decision not to turn away children with SEND despite the impact on staff.

Although we have less capacity to support children we don't ever turn them away. We ensure that we do the best we can with the little money that is provided but it increases staff workload and puts strain on ratios.

We have less capacity however these is nowhere else for them to go and we do not feel in a position to refuse them so staff are working even harder and

are unable to complete as much high quality teaching with all children including those with complex needs. Staff are spending a lot of their time just keeping children safe and changing nappies / accidents etc.

In other cases, schools were expecting to have to place a limit on the number of children requiring support:

To take account of the planned reduction of nursery funding, cuts are being made to staffing which means that we can only take a certain amount of children that require enhanced provision / one to one support. It is reaching the point where we have got to tell parents that we do not have a place available.

In some cases, schools were not able to give children as many hours as they would have wanted – a problem also often raised in relation to the 30 hours, as additional funding is often only provided for 15 hours:

We are really struggling and constantly juggling cover for needs with decreasing capacity of staff and higher numbers entering. We never turn a child away but may have to adjust their attendance to enable more children to access.

The issue was not only about children with complex needs, but at all levels:

Increased low level needs requiring support but with no increase in funding

In some cases, there was not enough funding to provide the specialist support children needed:

Support for children via EYIF [Early Years Inclusion Funding] has had to be rationed so the school will only be able to provide EP services to 3 children in our cohort of 34 children in receipt of EYIF.

The financial impact of being inclusive was widely flagged:

Roughly 30% of children at each school are SEND. To meet these needs I have experienced SEND support teams at each school. Each team costs in the region of £110K, only a small fraction of this is re-imbursed through the SENDif [SEND Inclusion Fund].. In previous years I have had a carry forward to help support this I no longer have a carry forward in fact I am in deficit. We are in a downward spiral of re-org, deficit, reorg.

The hourly rate to support children with SEND has been the same for many years and does not reflect current costs so is a cut in real terms. We estimate that we lose around £4,000 pa for each FTE place.

Accessing additional funding is getting harder and harder and the paperwork trail that is now involved is almost unmanageable

The amount of funding given by the LA does not really match a realistic wage for someone experienced to deal with the child's difficulties

Impact on children and families

Respondents talked about children potentially losing access to the expert support nursery schools have traditionally provided:

Children will not be able to benefit from interventions because of reduced staffing. This will have a profound impact on the progress of children with SEND. If we are unable to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children due to increased demand for places they will have to attend a provision where the expertise does not match what we offer. Parents will not benefit from the guidance and support of early years experts, which is what we are. Neither will they have access to wider networks of support in the community which we can tap into.

This year we have had to lose our play therapist who was a wonderful asset to the school. She worked two hours each week but the school is no longer able to afford her. The cuts to the SEN top up do not allow us to afford the hourly rates that additional professional support charge.

If there are further cuts and no secure funding for Maintained Nursery Schools, we will have no option but to close because we would not be able to operate. This would have a huge detrimental impact on the children and families.

There were concerns about lack of access to other agencies:

Harder to get children the external support they need. Longer waiting lists for appointments. Longer wait to get diagnosis. Without the above elements no EHC plans for these children. Balance between being a mainstream school and a special school is getting harder to see when looking at the childrens' needs.

In a rural area where families are isolated from alternative support services and settings who will accept children with SEND, children miss out on the opportunity to access the early support they need to achieve their optimum outcomes eg. diagnosis, therapy (including speech & language, physio, occupational therapy), EYSENIT etc.

Not only has the pandemic had an effect of children with SEND, SEND numbers are higher than they have ever been - the impact is that the younger children are receiving EHCPs at a later stage. We have had many families not follow up SALT, Audiology appointments during the pandemic as they did not have all the services checking in that they had made in the appointment in the same way - some families did not want virtual visits and opted out instead.

Respondents expressed concern that they were seeing an impact on children's outcomes with a knock-on effect on the support that would be needed from primary schools:

Children's progress may be impacted due to additional resources being harder to obtain. MNS is increasing support to families who are finding themselves on long waiting lists for referrals to other services.

Less support in the classroom meaning children will not make the progress that they could with the right interventions.

If we are unable to provide for these children, they are likely to face exclusions in other settings or once they arrive at mainstream school having not received the support required to enable a successful start to YR.

The pandemic has reduced contact with external professionals and so gathering evidence to apply for an EHCP has taken much longer. This means several children are moving into primary school with no top up funding in place. We always ask ourselves why is there no funding for Early Intervention when this can make such a difference to children's development? We try and support these children without any additional funding but with our staffing levels now cut to the absolute minimum this is now increasingly difficult.

There will undoubtedly be an increase in demand for places in Special School settings and potentially more children out of education if settings are at full capacity. Where will children with the greatest needs attend if mainstream settings cannot meet the child's needs and special schools are full?

This year we will not be able to offer to everyone. I am not sure where they will go, so could possibly be at home, unsupported, and not in the system. This will then have a long term effect on primary schools later down the line.

Other settings who could afford to offer more support because of their lower staff costs are increasingly turning away children with more complex needs, particularly those linked to behaviour and social communication, and these families are coming to us. We have absolutely reached a tipping point where we are struggling to meet children's needs.

The conflicting pressures of supporting as more children, with more needs and less resources was raising issues around risk assessment.

I also worry about the impact that has on the safety of children with additional needs.

The impact of the situation goes much wider than just the children with SEND, impacting the quality of all education received by children when staff are stretched ever thinner.

We have had to try to find support within the staff we have, so this impacts on our support of children from disadvantaged families ie 60% are typically at risk of delay for speech and language, but we are less able to deliver specialist focused teaching groups. It will also impact on our nurture group programme.

Less support available for children with lower level needs, as reduced funding means that it is all needed for targeted support for children with more complex needs.

It will impact more on the other children as we will have to increase ratios to the maximum and that will leave few adults to support the children, whilst we gain evidence to get extra funding

Having to be very flexible and adaptable in school has a knock on effect on every child/ class.

Conclusion

The evidence from the survey is clear that maintained nursery schools are facing an increase in demand for places for children with SEND and often with complex needs, while facing reducing resources both in their mainstream budgets and in the amount of high needs funding available. Staffing cuts and deficit budgets are reducing their flexibility to provide the support needed for children with SEND. All this impacts on children's life chances, will mean increased costs for the Exchequer when early intervention opportunities are missed, and will have knock-on effects for the primary and special schools as children move on to the next phase.

There is an urgent need to increase the amount and allocation of high needs funding in the early years, and to put in place the long-promised long-term funding formula for maintained nursery schools which is needed to allow them to provide support to high numbers of children with SEND who would otherwise have nowhere else to go.

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