



Thematic Questions and Responses from the LIVE Q&A on Essex Family Forum (EFF) and Essex County Council (ECC) Parent Information Session on the SEND Reforms.

It should be noted, as stated during the live Q&A, that the proposals remain high-level at this stage and a significant amount of detail has not yet been provided. As a result, many of the more specific questions cannot be fully answered, as the government has not yet set out the necessary detail.

It should also be noted that these are not proposals from Essex County Council, but from the government, as published in the SEND consultation.

Responses are therefore limited to the information currently provided by the government, alongside what Essex County Council is doing at a local level.

A Glossary of Terms for Acronyms / Abbreviations is included at the end of this document.

Question: What will the reassessments involve when children with an EHCP transition from primary to secondary?

At this stage, the government has not yet clearly outlined what reassessments will involve when children transition from primary to secondary education. In particular, there is no detailed guidance on how existing Education, Health and Care Plans will be reviewed and how, they will transfer into Individual Support Plans under the new system.

In relation to specialist provision packages, further detail is also still awaited. The intention is that there will be a national framework to guide how these packages are determined. This framework will be used to assess whether a child continues to require an Education, Health and Care Plan and moves into the specialist tier of support.

Where this is the case, the specialist provision package would be underpinned by both an Individual Support Plan (ISP) and an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). However, until the national guidance is published, the specific processes and criteria for reassessment require definition.

Question: Georgia Gould (Minister of State for School Standards) has said the experts at hand will include special school teachers. How will that be managed? Will there be separate outreach teams or will this be coming directly from existing staff at special schools?

At present, there is a commissioned outreach support model through ESSET (Essex Special Schools Education Trust). This is currently limited, with one practitioner per quadrant, and has been operating for the past 18 months as a pilot funded through the High Needs Block. This model was established prior to the SEND reforms and provides a strong foundation, as it has the potential to be scaled up.

Feedback from primary schools, which are the current users of the service, has been very positive. Parents whose children have been involved have also reported positive experiences.

The key question now is how this model can be expanded. As more children are expected to be educated within mainstream settings in the future, there may be a need to refocus some capacity from special schools into a broader outreach model.

The aim will be to work closely with both mainstream and special school partners to ensure sufficient capacity across the system. This must be achieved without impacting the quality of education within special schools, while also ensuring that mainstream schools have timely access to high-quality specialist advice from experienced practitioners.

At present, capacity is limited, with only four practitioners covering the whole of Essex, so significant expansion would be required. However, early testing suggests that this model provides a strong foundation for a more comprehensive service moving forward.

Question: Is the identified funding simply going to cover the current national and local deficit in SEND budgets, or will all the funding be directed towards implementing the new system?

The funding will not be used to address the existing deficit. There is a clear separation between the High Needs Block deficit and the funding allocated for implementing the SEND reforms.

Essex is currently developing its response to the SEND reform programme. If the Department for Education (DfE) is satisfied that the plan demonstrates the ability to deliver the intended system changes, this may enable access to financial support, effectively debt relief, within the High Needs Block.

At present, Essex, like most areas nationally, has a deficit in the High Needs Block. If the SEND reform plan is approved by the Secretary of State, funding could be released to address up to 90% of that deficit, based on the position at the end of the 2025–26 financial year.

However, the funding allocated for the reforms themselves is strictly for implementation. It will not be used to offset the existing deficit but will instead be focused entirely on delivering and embedding the new system effectively.

Question: How will ECC hold education settings to account if they fail to provide the provision as outlined in the reform plans, in particular when it comes to MATs?

The government's intention is to introduce national inclusion standards. It will be important to see how these are defined, as they will provide a framework against which we can assess our current position, particularly in relation to the role mainstream schools will play within the new system.

A central expectation within the reforms is that schools will work collaboratively. While this session has primarily focused on providing information for you as the audience, there is a clear requirement for schools to engage in partnership working. In addition, Ofsted now has an increased focus on inclusion as part of its inspection framework.

Essex County Council will work closely with schools to co-design what this looks like in practice. This will include developing outline frameworks for the targeted and targeted-plus layers of support, as well as how schools will work with families to produce individual support plans for children within these tiers.

There was also a question raised regarding "ordinarily available provision." Over the next 12 to 18 months, a key priority will be ensuring that this is fully embedded across all schools as part of a quality-first teaching approach.

The reforms are also clear that SEND is not solely the responsibility of the SENCo. There are proposals for the SENCo role to become more strategic, and leadership teams will need to ensure consistency of support across their settings.

A fundamental principle of the reforms is a "mainstream first" approach for all children, except where specialist provision is required. This means that all schools will be expected to meet needs across the universal, targeted, and targeted-plus levels of support.

To support this, a framework will be introduced to assess schools against these expectations. In terms of accountability, there are a number of mechanisms available. We have strong relationships with our schools, including academies, and will continue to work collaboratively. Where schools are not yet meeting expectations, conversations will focus on identifying the support required—whether through the specialist support service, CPD, or outreach provision.

However, where there is a continued inability to meet expectations, further discussions may take place with the Department for Education, who also have a responsibility to ensure successful implementation of the reforms. This approach will enable more focused and

constructive conversations with schools about meeting the expectations set out within the SEND reforms.

Question: Would it be possible to have teams of expert at hand based at special schools to support both cohorts and work collaboratively? In Chelmsford, we have 44 mainstream schools. How many experts are we expecting to have to support the schools?

While ECC understand the broad framework of the “expert at hand” service, ECC have not yet fully worked through the detail of what this will look like in practice. At present, the government’s outline within the reforms is quite high-level. ECC’s ambition is that, in Essex, we develop this into a more comprehensive and impactful model to better support schools.

The current vision is that schools will work within collaborations or clusters, and this will include special schools and their role within the wider system. The “expert at hand” service would then wrap around these groups of schools, providing targeted support.

Within the reforms, the “expert at hand” service is primarily described as supporting children at the targeted-plus level within the proposed tiered approach. However, through early discussions with colleagues, including MAT and school leaders, it is clear that this service should also play a key role in building capacity across all schools. This means strengthening provision not only at the targeted-plus level, but also at the universal and targeted levels.

In Essex, we therefore envisage designing the service to:

- Build capability and confidence within schools at the universal and targeted levels
- Provide specialist support for children with more complex needs at the targeted-plus level

This could include support with access to education, educational psychology, speech, language and communication needs, and other therapeutic services. It may also involve drawing on expertise from special schools, as well as our existing inclusion partner workforce and engagement facilitators.

A key priority will be ensuring that the service operates equitably and consistently across all schools it supports. Alongside this, we will need to design an appropriate level of oversight to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the “expert at hand” service across Essex.

We are currently awaiting further national guidance, which has not yet been published. However, between now and the end of the summer term, we intend to co-produce the model with stakeholders and begin a “test and learn” approach to understand what works best in practice.

Overall, our intention is to develop a broader and more ambitious interpretation of the “expert at hand” service than is currently outlined within the reform proposals, ensuring it delivers meaningful and sustainable support for schools and children across Essex.

Question: What will the Reforms mean for EOTAS?

ECC’s assumption is that, if it is not explicitly referenced, then no change is currently proposed. Any amendment to the EOTAS system would require new legislation, and there has been no indication that this forms part of the forthcoming legislative programme.

EFF: The NNPCF has been advised by Minster Gould, that there will be no changes to EOTAS.

Question: How will this work for children and young people who mask and have their needs are not seen at school?

While some of the detail is not yet fully defined, ECC would expect this to be exactly the type of issue where schools would look to the “expert at hand” service for additional support and specialist input. This is an area where professionals such as educational psychologists, and colleagues within health services, can bring a greater depth of knowledge and understanding.

The intention from the Department for Education appears to be that, as less time is required from some professionals for the statutory elements of SEND (such as contributing to needs assessments), there will be increased capacity for earlier intervention. This should enable professionals to work more proactively with schools, helping to address complex situations sooner and providing more holistic support.

Importantly, this includes bringing greater awareness of the factors beyond the school environment that can significantly impact a young person’s ability to access education, as well as their overall quality of life. For example, at a recent session in Basildon, many parents shared concerns about the extent to which schools recognise the impact of experiences outside of school, even when these are not immediately visible to staff.

In this context, ECC would expect the “expert at hand” service to play a key role in deepening understanding and providing guidance to schools around less visible aspects of SEND, such as masking, as well as supporting more effective responses to these needs

Question: Will these new reforms help our children accessing school hubs or being able to access a school hub?

ECC considers that this approach would bring greater clarity around the purpose of inclusion hubs, both in terms of how they support schools and, more importantly, the outcomes they deliver for children and young people.

There will be clear points at which children access these hubs. Some may require short-term intervention, while others may need more sustained support, depending on the level of need and the intended outcomes agreed between the school and parents.

In principle, the introduction of an inclusion base in every secondary school, alongside an increase in provision within primary schools, should improve access. This is particularly relevant within the proposed two-tier model, which includes both a school or multi-academy trust-funded layer and a local authority-funded layer for children with more complex needs.

Overall, this model should increase capacity within mainstream schools to meet a wider range of needs, both through high-quality classroom provision and through access to more specialist interventions.

Question: How are you going to bridge the gap in educational psychologists in training in SEND and neurodivergence as personally, they see there's a lot of difficulty in terms of educational psychologists and SEND and neurodivergence?

The Department for Education (DfE), as part of the reform programme, is expanding the number of training placements for educational psychologists (EPs). However, the key issue is not solely the quantity of professionals being trained, but also the quality of that training.

It is important that consultation responses reflect this concern. The DfE needs to understand that the focus must be on developing a workforce that is not only larger, but also highly skilled, up to date, and equipped to respond to the evolving needs of children and young people. This includes a strong understanding of neurodivergence and expertise across the full range of SEND.

While Essex County Council (ECC) does not directly train educational psychologists, it is in a position to respond to the DfE and emphasise that workforce development must prioritise both quality and capacity.

There are also understandable concerns about where additional educational psychologists will come from. Currently, due to the high demand associated with statutory assessments, ECC, like many local authorities, has commissioned private EP agencies to help address backlogs. Work is underway to reduce this backlog as quickly as possible, with the aim of significantly improving timeliness by early next year.

As reliance on private agencies decreases, there is an opportunity for educational psychologists to return to local authority roles. In recent years, some EPs have moved into private agency work due to more favourable financial incentives. However, as demand stabilises and new models of delivery emerge—such as the proposed “expert at hand” service, there is potential to rebuild capacity within local authority services.

Looking ahead, it is anticipated that EP services will play a key role within these new delivery models, working closely with schools and partners. While there are no definitive conclusions at this stage, part of the longer-term approach will involve exploring how to encourage professionals back into local authority employment to strengthen and sustain the workforce.

Question: What will happen if parents don't agree with the detail that is listed within their child's individual support plan and there's a disagreement where the parent perhaps thinks that support should sit at specialist support (EHCP) and the professionals feel that should be at Targeted or Targeted Plus. How can parents challenge this?

The proposals indicate that the first route for parents to raise a disagreement regarding their child’s individual support plan should be through the school’s complaints process. There is also a clear emphasis within both the reforms and the accompanying White Paper on strengthening and improving school complaints procedures.

This initial route applies both to concerns about the provision outlined in the individual support plan and to decisions about whether a child’s needs are best met at the targeted or targeted-plus level.

In situations where there is disagreement, it would be appropriate to involve the “expert at hand” service. This service could play a key role in bringing together the school and the family, helping to reach a shared understanding and agreement, supported by professional expertise.

Where parents believe their child requires a specialist support package (and therefore an Education, Health and Care Plan), there will be a national framework to guide decision-making and improve consistency. However, parents will continue to have the right to challenge decisions.

This includes:

- Disagreements about whether a child’s needs sit within the targeted or targeted-plus level
- Decisions relating to access to specialist support packages

In such cases, parents will retain the right to appeal to the SEND Tribunal if they feel a decision is not appropriate.

While every effort will be made to resolve disagreements earlier—drawing on professional expertise and the national framework—the right of appeal remains an important safeguard within the system.

Question: Will the inclusion training being offered to schools be compulsory or optional and for what professionals?

The distinction here is less about what is formally “compulsory” and more about establishing clear expectations across the system.

There is a clear expectation that Essex County Council (ECC), as the local authority, working alongside the Integrated Care Board (ICB), will support schools to meet the national inclusion standards. While we are still awaiting the final detail of these standards, they will set the minimum baseline that all schools will be expected to achieve. Where schools are not meeting this baseline, ECC will work with them to ensure they are supported to reach it. This will be a key step in establishing consistency across the system.

To achieve this, we must make full use of the resources already available within Essex. For example, we have a well-established “ordinarily available” toolkit and framework; however, it is not yet consistently embedded across all schools. Moving forward, there will be a much clearer expectation that this is fully implemented.

Similarly, we have existing approaches such as the trauma perceptive practice programme, where there will be an expectation that all schools are actively engaging and working in a trauma-informed way. Alongside this, initiatives such as the balanced system for speech, language and communication, and the wider inclusion strategy, will require consistent engagement from all schools.

The key shift is from optional engagement to clear, system-wide expectations. All schools will need to engage with these approaches, as they form part of their responsibility in implementing the SEND reforms.

Ultimately, the aim is to ensure a consistent standard of provision, so that children and young people at the targeted and targeted-plus levels can attend their local mainstream school where this is the preferred choice for families.

In terms of enforcement, the initial approach will be through collaboration and co-production with schools. However, where there is a lack of engagement, more formal discussions may take place, and if necessary, concerns could be escalated to the Department for Education (DfE). That said, Essex already has many strong examples of good practice, and we will build on these to support the wider system.

Question: Will the models of inclusion bases for primary and secondary be tailoring those to the age groups? Will they be the same in primary and secondary?

It is likely that there will continue to be some differences in provision, as there are currently. For example, we already have an emerging number of resource provisions within primary schools for children with severe learning difficulties. It is less clear whether this model would translate effectively into large mainstream secondary schools, particularly given the size and complexity of those environments. It may be more challenging for certain cohorts of need to be appropriately supported within a setting of 1,500–2,000 pupils.

At this stage, it is important to recognise that this work is still in the early phases. The Department for Education (DfE) expects local areas to begin developing plans, but these will need to be shaped in partnership with schools and other stakeholders.

Geography is also a significant factor. Essex is a large and diverse county, and considerations such as rural isolation will influence how provision is designed. For example, in areas like the Dengie, where there is only one secondary school, it may not be feasible for a single inclusion base to meet the full range of needs locally. In such cases, a model based on clusters of schools may be more appropriate, although this can present additional challenges in more rural and dispersed communities.

At present, there are no definitive answers to all of these questions. The system is still in a consultation phase, and while planning is progressing, many aspects will evolve over time. A key part of this process will be listening carefully to the views of parents, carers, schools, and partners to help shape future provision.

It is important to take a collaborative approach. Previous reforms were not always implemented in a way that fully reflected stakeholder input, and there is a clear intention that this process will be different. The phased approach to implementation is also critical. Introducing all changes at once would be extremely challenging; instead, the current model allows time to build the necessary foundations for success.

As part of this, further work will be needed to define what inclusion bases look like in practice, the cohorts they are designed to support, and how these differ from both mainstream provision and special school placements. There is already a wide range of need being met across both mainstream and specialist settings, and in some cases, the levels of need in special schools and mainstream settings overlap. These are all important factors that will need to be carefully considered as the system develops.

EFF: The NNPCF has been advised us that there is guidance being drawn up on inclusion bases via the council for disabled children, which PCF have fed to via the NNPCF.

Question: How will the strong universal offer be standardised across all mainstream settings to ensure consistent quality?

This will be achieved through a combination of consistently implementing the “ordinarily available” framework and strengthening workforce development through a clear programme of CPD.

Firstly, it is essential that the ordinarily available framework is fully embedded across all schools. We will review this framework to ensure it remains fit for purpose, and once confirmed, there will be a clear expectation that it is delivered consistently as a minimum standard in every setting.

Alongside this, the Workforce Development Programme will set out the CPD offer available to schools. For example, where a school has a newly appointed SENCo, there will be a need to provide targeted support to ensure they are quickly equipped with the knowledge and skills required for the role.

More broadly, schools will need to become increasingly confident in supporting children with a wider range of needs, including those with greater complexity. The expectation is that schools will have the core skills and expertise in place as part of their universal offer.

Additional support will then be available through the “expert at hand” service, as well as through outreach services, to complement and strengthen what schools already provide.

Overall, the reforms set a clear direction of travel—a raising of expectations across all schools—and it will be important that we work collectively to drive this forward and ensure consistency in practice

Question: What will happen to a CYP with an EHCP enters post 16 and moves into college and university.

It is fair to say that some of the current pathways are not as well developed as they need to be. At an Essex level, we are already working with post-16 providers to strengthen this offer, and this work began prior to the announcement of the reforms.

The aim is to ensure that there are more high-quality, local options available for both young people and their families. At present, where independent placements are in place, these are often extended into post-16 provision due to a lack of suitable local college options. This highlights a gap that we are actively seeking to address.

Both the Department for Education (DfE) and Essex County Council (ECC) share the intention of developing a much stronger and more consistent local offer—not only across Key Stages 1 to 4, but also at Key Stage 5 and beyond.

Question: Mental health support is not mentioned within reforms. With many children facing crisis and the appropriate support not being there, with some having to face long waiting lists, not being able to afford private provision, what will happen.

There is ongoing rollout of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs), and in time, all schools in Essex will have access to this provision. In addition, support continues to be commissioned through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), although it is recognised that waiting times remain a significant concern.

Where there are individual cases causing particular concern, it would be advisable for schools to liaise with the appropriate contacts within the local authority so that additional support can be considered during the interim period.

Encouragingly, with the establishment of the new Greater Essex Integrated Care Board (ICB), there is a renewed focus on strengthening mental health services. Essex County Council (ECC) has already begun engagement with children's leads within the ICB, and improving the mental health system has been identified as a shared priority.

While progress is being made, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing challenges, particularly around access and waiting times and these remain areas of active focus

Question: Alongside Speech and Language Therapy (SALT), Occupational Therapy (OT), and Educational Psychology (EP) supporting clusters of schools, will the Autism Outreach Team form part of the “expert at hand” service for autistic children and young people who do not have a learning disability?

ECC expectation would be that, if the “expert at hand” model were introduced tomorrow, the Autism Outreach Team would form a key part of that offer. They bring specialist expertise and are already well placed to support schools, so it would be appropriate for them to be included.

While that may sound like a simplified view, when considering the existing system and the expertise currently available, they would certainly be a strong and relevant component of the mode.

Question: Will EHCPs be updated by the local authority or the SENCOs?

The role of the local authority is one of several areas within the reforms that is not yet clearly defined. At present, the role of the local authority post-reform lacks clarity. As a result, the answer to some of these questions could be one, both, or neither, and this remains an area to be confirmed.

However, there is a strong view that the local authority should continue to hold responsibility for maintaining Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Without this, there is a risk that the system becomes overly reliant on individual families and schools navigating support independently, which could feel isolating for many.

At this stage, Essex County Council (ECC) is working on the assumption that EHCPs will continue to be maintained by the local authority, both within the current system and, although not yet fully defined, within any future model involving specialist support packages. Any change to this arrangement would require significant legal and legislative reform.

Given the scale of legislative change already required, it is unlikely that such a fundamental shift would be made without clear intent. As part of the consultation response, ECC is highlighting that there is currently limited detail regarding how local authorities will sustain the workforce needed to manage what could be a substantial number of plans over the coming years, particularly during any transition period leading up to full implementation of the reforms.

This is an important consideration, and one that is being actively fed back through the consultation process.

Question: What within the SEND reforms will enable schools to reduce pressure on children and young people, particularly those at risk of EBSA, and support more flexible GCSE pathways where taking fewer exams would better support their mental health?

The reforms do not set out a specific answer to this question. However, the underlying principle, or “spirit”, of the reforms is that mainstream schools should take a more inclusive approach, including making reasonable adjustments for individual pupils.

This means recognising that not every young person will be working towards the same outcomes, particularly those outcomes on which schools are traditionally judged, whether by Ofsted, the media, or wider expectations. Instead, there should be greater flexibility to prioritise a young person’s wellbeing alongside, or in some cases above, academic attainment.

Historically, there have been examples of this approach, where schools and families worked together to agree that pursuing a full set of GCSEs was not in a child’s best interests at that time, and that reducing pressure was necessary to support their wellbeing. The hope is that the reforms will make these conversations easier and more accepted, enabling more collaborative and balanced decision-making between schools and families.

It is also important to recognise that complex needs are not limited to learning difficulties. They can include a wide range of factors, such as emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA),

mental health challenges, and social and emotional needs, which can significantly impact a young person's ability to access education.

As such, there cannot be a "one size fits all" approach. While the reforms promote a "mainstream first" model, it is not realistic to assume that all needs can be met within mainstream settings alone. There will continue to be an important role for specialist and alternative provision to support those young people whose needs cannot be fully met in a mainstream environment.

Question: Will children and young people need to be in specialist provision to receive a specialist support package (EHCP), or will they still be able to access this support within mainstream education if that is their preference?

Based on the current proposals, the language suggests that children with the most complex needs will be eligible for a specialist support package, which will be underpinned by an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This may imply that many of these children would access specialist settings, such as special schools.

However, it is not expected that all children with an EHCP will be placed in special schools. There will continue to be a cohort of children with EHCPs whose needs can be appropriately met within mainstream settings.

The intention is that, where suitable, children and young people with EHCPs will be supported within mainstream schools, as is the case currently. Ultimately, placement decisions will be based on individual needs and whether those needs can be effectively met in a particular setting.

Acronyms and terms for Glossary

- **High Needs Block** – Funding stream for SEND provision
- **Ordinarily Available Provision** – (OAP) Expected support all schools should provide
- **Specialist Provision Package** – Proposed structured support under reforms
- **Targeted / Targeted Plus** – Proposed tiers of SEND support under reforms
- **Universal Offer** – Core support available to all pupils

- **CAMHS** – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- **CPD** – Continuing Professional Development
- **CYP** – Children and Young People
- **DfE** – Department for Education
- **ECC** – Essex County Council
- **EFF** – Essex Family Forum
- **EHCP** – Education, Health and Care Plan
- **EP** – Educational Psychologist / Educational Psychology
- **EOTAS** – Education Otherwise Than At School
- **ESSET** – Essex Special Schools Education Trust
- **ICB** – Integrated Care Board
- **ISP** – Individual Support Plan
- **MAT** – Multi-Academy Trust
- **MHST** – Mental Health Support Team
- **NNPCF** – National Network of Parent Carer Forums
- **OT** – Occupational Therapy / Occupational Therapist
- **PCF** – Parent Carer Forum
- **SALT** – Speech and Language Therapy
- **SEND** – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- **SENCo** – Special Educational Needs Coordinator