

ADDRESSING THE SEND CRISIS UPDATE:

IMPLEMENTING WHAT WORKS IN A WORSENING CRISIS

Addressing the SEND crisis: Implementing what works in a worsening crisis

This update highlights:

- Changes since the Child of the North report in 2024 highlighted a **Special Educational Need (SEN) system in crisis**, with geographical inequalities meaning that children in disadvantaged areas are further impeded by system failures [1].
- A **widening gap since 2023/24 in severe absence** (missing over 50% of school) between children with an EHCP and children without SEN [2].
- The annual increases in delays in providing EHCP plans, with **only 46.4% of EHC plans issued within the recommended 20 weeks**, a worsening situation to the one we flagged in 2024 [3].
- Schools still lacking the skills, confidence and resources to support the **1.28 million children in England with SEN** [4].
- New evidence confirming that teacher-based assessments could be used to shift SEN support from a diagnosis-led to a needs-led system. **Novel analyses show that school readiness measures can be used to identify need early** and address the structural inequalities blighting the UK [5].

Education data can identify needs

Our 2024 report highlighted the potential of routine teacher observations to identify children's educational needs at the point of school entry [6].

New analysis of Born in Bradford's linked NHS and education data has confirmed that school readiness data could signal the likelihood of subsequent autism diagnosis. The analysis has also provided **new insights into the structural inequalities within autism diagnoses**. Females and ethnic minority heritage children are significantly less likely to be diagnosed with autism. Analysis showed a double disadvantage effect, whereby females who were from an ethnic minority heritage were the least likely to receive an autism diagnosis [7]. Crucially, **school readiness data were especially predictive of subsequent autism diagnosis** for children from a Pakistani heritage. This highlights the potential of education data to identify needs early, particularly among disadvantaged groups.

A continuing crisis

Schools continue to report **limited access to support services such as educational psychology, speech and language therapy, and child and adolescent mental health services** [8]. This means that children are too frequently not receiving the support that they need. Families must battle through complex systems to try and get support for their children. A regional family survey from a SEN accountability group shows that 92% of families find navigating the system detrimental to their mental health [9]. **Families urgently want a central, trusted "one stop shop" for online support resources that they can use.**

While the scale of the SEN crisis is national, there is **substantial regional variation**, meaning some families are disproportionately disadvantaged because of their postcode. Not only is there variation between regions in the North and South of England, there is also substantial variation within regions. For example, some areas, such as Barnsley, issue 96.8% of EHC plans within 20 weeks, while other areas, such as Leeds, only deliver 9.3% in this timeframe [3].

A lack of early identification and support can have adverse outcomes for children and young people with SEN. For example, **school absences, suspensions, and permanent exclusions are disproportionately prevalent among children with SEN** [10]. Severe absence rates have increased for pupils with EHC plans and SEN support, with SEN pupils over four and a half times more likely to be a severe absentee than pupils with no identified SEN [2]. The rate of **school suspensions for children with SEN is over 3 times higher** than for children with no identified SEN [4]. Furthermore, **the rate of permanent exclusions is over 5 times higher** for children with SEN compared to children with no identified SEN [4].

Disengagement from the school system can have profound consequences for children's long-term outcomes. According to government data, of all children that had ever been recorded as having SEN, 19% had ever been cautioned or sentenced for any offence and 6% for a serious violence offence [11]. It is therefore of the upmost importance to the UK that the needs of children with SEN are identified early and sufficient resources are available to implement early support to mitigate the likelihood of adverse outcomes (e.g., disengagement from the school system and involvement with the criminal justice service).

The evidence highlights the urgent need to implement whole-system level support for children with special educational needs.

Accumulating evidence

A new large-scale population study, based on **over 125,000 children in Bradford**, examined whether England's universal school readiness assessment (the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile) could act as an early signal of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) related needs. The research explored disparities in ADHD diagnosis across sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and assessed the predictive value of early teacher observations by linking educational and healthcare records through the Connected Bradford database.

The study found pronounced **structural inequalities in ADHD diagnosis**. Boys were substantially more likely than girls to receive a diagnosis, and White British children were diagnosed at higher rates than children of South Asian or other ethnic heritages. The lowest diagnostic rates were observed among South Asian girls which reflects an intersectional disadvantage of gender and ethnicity. Despite drastic increases in the overall rates of diagnosis over time, these inequalities persist. Children who had ever received free school meals were also less likely to be diagnosed, but the relationship with neighbourhood deprivation was weaker, suggesting complex interactions between socioeconomic and cultural factors in accessing assessment and support.

Importantly, the study demonstrated that **school readiness at age 4-5 years was strongly associated with later ADHD diagnosis**. Children who did not achieve a "Good Level of Development" were over twice as likely to be diagnosed with ADHD (2.6% vs 1.0%), even after adjusting for background factors. These findings suggest that teacher-based assessments capture early signs of attentional and behavioural challenges and should therefore be used to help identify children who would benefit from early support.

These findings show that universal school entry assessments offer an **equitable, cost-effective opportunity to detect ADHD-related educational needs early**, particularly if combined with other data sources. Embedding teacher observations into multi-agency assessment pathways could help address entrenched diagnostic inequalities, ensuring that neurodivergent children (especially girls and those from minority ethnic backgrounds) are recognised and supported sooner to thrive in education and beyond.

Policy implications

The government has committed to reforming the SEND system through its forthcoming Schools White Paper. The recommendations we made in 2024 still require urgent implementation and we once more call upon government to take the following steps:

1. Use holistic measures of a child's development to identify pupils with increased likelihood of having SEN.
2. Improve and extend training opportunities on SEN for professionals and families.
3. Connect systems more effectively to facilitate earlier identification of SEN and the provision of more appropriate support.

The stakes are high. Without action, the SEND crisis will deepen, the UK's economy will suffer, the NHS will remain under great pressure, and the links between a child's background and life chances will remain.

Conclusion

The 2024 report described a SEND system under **"unsustainable pressure"** with children failing to receive timely support.

One year later, the evidence suggests the crisis has worsened. A lack of early identification and support of children with SEN has profound impacts on long term health, and the economy. Government must act now if it wants to achieve its Missions.

The lesson is clear: schools matter. They can be places of connection, belonging, and support – or places of stress, exclusion, and inequality. The difference lies not in rhetoric, but in resources, relationships, and readiness.

The next phase must be about learning – systematically evaluating what works, and ensuring that children in disadvantaged areas where needs are greatest - such as the North of England - are not left behind.

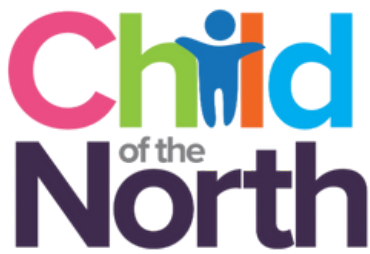
The current challenge is to implement the evidence into meaningful practice.

"We need a system that recognises young people with SEN for who they are and affords them the education, support and dignity they deserve. Society, and the system, should see my little boy for the amazing little man he is".

- Joanne: Mother of Charlie who is growing up in Bradford with SEND

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This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

A note about language

Please note that this report often uses “schools” as shorthand for “schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools.” One central message of this report is the need for a “whole system” approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

About Child of the North

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNort1](#) [@childofthenorth.bsky.social](#)

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk [@N8research](#) [@n8research.bsky.social](#)

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children’s Commissioner, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children’s issues for decades, the Centre’s agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people’s futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. www.centreforyounglives.org.uk [@CfYounglives](#)

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