LIVING WITH SEND

Local perspectives from Norwich North

Living with SEND

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The Office of Alice Macdonald MP House of Commons Westminster London SW1A OAA

alicemacdonald.org alice.macdonald.mp@parliament.uk

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Foreword

The support system for children and young people with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is failing families in Norwich North and across the country. SEND is one of the issues I receive most contact about from constituents and few others inspire as much frustration, confusion and disappointment.

To better understand the state of the SEND system in Norwich, in May, I invited constituents to share their experiences in both an online survey and at an in-person forum. Alongside this, I have visited schools across the constituency (Norwich North), meeting with schoolteachers and constituents to listen to the challenges they are facing and the changes they want to see.

It is impossible to conclude anything other than that the SEND system is in crisis – one that has been allowed to develop and spiral for far too long.

Partially, this pressure is due to the growing number of children diagnosed with SEND. From 2019 – 2024, in Norfolk, the number of children in schools requiring SEN support, either with or without Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, has risen from 20,019 to 26,134 – a rise of about 30% ¹. While this report will not investigate any factors behind this, it provides important context to a complex system under severe strain.

Although many parents and carers shared distressing stories of trying to access support for their children, they also told touching tales about the great efforts made by individuals within the system to help them along the way. It is clear that so many teachers, support staff, and healthcare professionals are doing an exemplary job against extraordinary odds. So many have stepped up in Norwich North to mitigate the effects of this failing system.

Of course, many raised the financial pressures the system is under. I am pleased that the Government allocated an additional £1bn of funding for SEND in the 2024 Autumn Budget of which Norfolk County Council has been allocated £153m, an increase of £11.1 million. However, funding is by no means the sole issue. It is clear that change is needed across many levels.



The following report compiles key findings from the SEND forum, months of constituency casework and the 75 respondents to my online survey. I want to thank everyone who shared their experiences with me, and encourage constituents to continue doing so if I can offer any support.

Based on recurring themes raised by parents, carers, teachers and individuals operating across the entire SEND system, the report also includes recommendations on how to best improve the system for Norfolk's children and their families. I will be sharing this with the Government and Norfolk County Council to help ensure the voices of constituents in Norwich North are heard.

Alice Macdonald I

Facts and Figures



Responses to online consultation



Constituents attended in person forum

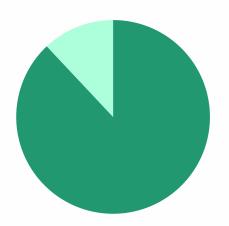


Visits to local schools since being elected

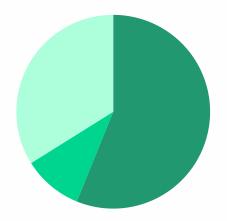
" What has your experience of SEND services in Norfolk been like?"

"Draining"

The quotes throughout this report have been taken from comments made by parents, carers, and professionals as part of the forum and online consultation



88% of survey respondents stated they had experienced significant wait times or delays for diagnoses and/or EHC plans



56.3% of EHC plans in Norfolk last year were issued within 20 weeks (excluding exceptions)

This compares to 46.4% across England



~30,000 children and young people aged 0-25 with SEND in Norfolk *

(NCC figures, 2025)



£890,000 legal bill for Norfolk County Council's tribunals relating to SEND (2023-24)



£40million to fund school transport for children with SEND per annum in Norfolk



Additional £11million in Government SEND funding for Norfolk County Council

Diagnosis

The first point of contact for both parents /carers and children within the SEND system is through diagnosis, whereby symptoms of additional needs or neurodiversity are often picked up by medical or educational professionals, followed by the creation of a support pathway for the child.

The importance of an early diagnosis for children cannot be overstated. One of the most common problems mentioned at the forum was the amount of time it takes to receive a full assessment and diagnosis. As of January 2025, children and young people are waiting more than six years for a neurodevelopmental assessment in Norfolk⁵.

While waiting for a diagnosis, the most effective support measures – those specifically tailored and medically advised to address the specific condition(s) – are unable to be implemented.

I listened to harrowing stories of children being left for up to five years without a diagnosis meanwhile suffering bullying, social isolation and a decline in mental health. All the while, parents and carers often felt unheard by medical professionals and teachers.

This is not only heart breaking but totally unacceptable.

This delay seems to be exacerbated by what many felt was a lack of communication between organisations involved in the process.

Many parents and carers feel as though they were being handed from pillar to post when dealing with multiple actors in the SEND system, with no consistent single point of contact to lead them through the often-complex requirements to receiving much needed help.

When seeking a diagnosis, parents and carers have reported to me that they have had to move on from the NHS process due to waiting times, and were forced to pay for costly private diagnoses – often at great impact to their personal finances. This also highlights the troubling reality that individuals without the financial means are forced to endure longer wait times due to their economic circumstances.

" We were on the NHS waiting list for an autism diagnosis for my 11-year old daughter for 4 years before we decided to have her assessed privately (funded by my mother) as she was really struggling in school at the time"

Many parents / carers expressed that "Right to Choose", which allows them to select an NHS provider and location following a referral for an assessment, was a positive move however options are still limited with similar waiting lists. Additionally, many shared that digital options in their current form are not a useful alternative, finding online assessments unsuitable for children with SEND and unnavigable for parents and carers.



For my children the waiting lists are 6-8 years long just for a diagnosis and even going Right to Choose is a whole back and forth process

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Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans

After diagnosis, the next step is to put in place support that will help manage extra needs including learning, or physical and mental conditions. There are three levels of support available, which local authorities, in this case Norfolk County Council, have a statutory duty to provide. The purpose of these levels is to provide support proportionate to the need of the child.

Levels 1 and 2 generally cover needs that can be provided for by mainstream schools, sometimes involving external specialists like speech therapy. Level 3 involves the creation of an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan which is designed to address complex needs that cannot be met through mainstream schools alone. These are legal documents, coordinated by local authorities with input from professionals in healthcare and education; they can be requested but rejected if there is not sufficient evidence that this level of support is required.

Regulations require the overall time from the local authority receiving a request for an assessment to the EHC plan being issued (if one is required) should be no longer than 20 weeks. In Norfolk, 56.3% were issued within 20 weeks (excluding exceptions). This compares to 46.4% across England.

This delay means that children are moving through the education system faster than support systems can adapt to their developmental needs. Decisions about which schools are best suited to meet the requirements of EHC plans are often

delayed, preventing Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) from delivering timely and effective support.

The way in which the local authority collects the information necessary to produce EHC plans also demonstrates several problems with the system.

I was told that crucial paperwork has been lost by assessors and coordinators, some GPs have refused to corroborate the evidence of parents and carers, and forms have not been submitted by those responsible for providing information that feeds into the plan.

Communication between statutory services and parents / carers can also be challenging, with parents and carers feeling that they have to chase for information and for things to be done. Many of them believed that only the school could apply for their child to receive an EHC Plan; at no point did anyone tell them that they could apply directly themselves.

What was obvious through both the forum and the survey was that an adversarial system between schools, local authorities, parents and carers was all too common – a view shared by many teachers, local authority staff and parents / carers themselves.

"We, as a school, are often put in a very difficult position as the communication from NCC [Norfolk County Council] to parents and carers is very poor, meaning that we then become the outlet for parents to vent their frustrations and anger at the lack of support for their child "

Often this comes to a head when, whether rightly or wrongly, Norfolk County Council declines to offer additional support for children with SEND, such as an EHC Plan or funding for specialist services like speech therapy, resulting in legal cases (tribunals) brought forward by parents and carers.

From 2023-2024, Norfolk County Council's legal bill for tribunals resulting from defending the provision of SEND services was £890,000 8.85% of cases are brought by parents / carers who wanted a special school rather than a mainstream school in their child's EHC plan. Of the 47 cases decided at final hearing in that year, 64% were found fully in favour of the parents / carers.

Fundamentally, there appears to be a high level of distrust between parents / carers and the various actors within the system, no doubt propelled by long waiting times and the emotional stress this causes. They felt like they were having to be parents / carers and experts in both their child's needs and how be an effective advocate for them.

But this is not to say that these organisations do not face extreme challenges of their own. Many respondents to my SEND survey and at the forum empathised with the difficulties schools and GPs had with a lack of funding, time and expertise.

" Prior to diagnosis we were turned down for an EHCP assessment, which was overturned at mediation, then were turned down for a plan. Post-diagnosis we applied again and this time my daughter was approved for an EHCP. With the support of an EHCP in place things improved at school and she actually thrived in year 6"



SEND Forum hosted by Alice Macdonald, May 2025

School and Support Systems





When EHC plans are assigned, the majority of provisions are often planned to take place in schools. However, with class sizes overburdened, school funding squeezed and a lack of teaching assistants, schools often lack the capacity to effectively implement EHC plans or deliver the direct support students require. Further organisational limitations include staff being overworked, difficulty in staff retention and a lack of joined up working across services.

This can create further problems later down the line: when EHC plans are assigned, they are often not fully adhered to in school and they do not evolve with the child due to a lack of EHC plan coordinators.

" Our school said that even if I applied for an EHC plan there would be no funding to support it "

Meanwhile, different schools and regions cater for SEND provisions in different ways. The lack of a standardised practice, alongside the lack of free training available for teachers, undermines confidence of both parents / carers and teachers leading to varying results for students. Efforts should be made to offer targeted support to teachers to enable them to cater for students with SEND as effectively as possible.

"Schools need specialist training and capacity to support neurodivergent children, not just "inclusion" on paper. Most of all, SEND children should stop being treated as an afterthought – every delay causes real harm, and the current system is setting families and schools up to fail "

A crucial but often overlooked aspect is the transitions between primary and secondary school to further education and beyond. Parents and carers raised how a lack of communication between institutions creates confusion over the services their children will be offered at the new school, while a lack of data transfer means that the individuality of care is not carried forward.

" Transition paperwork [needs to be] clearer so parents actually know that they can review EHCP before child moves to the next school"

" It took over 6 years to get an NHS diagnosis. We paid for a private ASC diagnosis but could not afford to pay for ADHD privately too especially considering medication. We had to pay for the ASC as could not get an EHCP without it and my daughter was transitioning to high school and needed specialist provision but this was not possible without an EHCP"

Some parents / carers also felt that, in some cases, teachers do not have the necessary skills to de-escalate situations, often complex and arising due to their child's unique emotional needs. Far too often, they say, small incidents lead to expulsion. National data also appears to back this up, with children with SEN five times more likely to be excluded than those without?

However, the County Council has taken some positive steps towards addressing some of these challenges through its Local First Inclusion programme.

The programme aims to provide greater support to mainstream schools and recognises the importance of providing schooling closer to children's' homes. As a result, it's committed to building more state-funded specialist schools and resource bases.

The use of Alternative Provision to support mainstream schools has been extremely welcome. Alternative providers deliver education for children with SEND, on a site outside of the mainstream school, usually for a couple of days a week, focusing on different subjects and adopting learning patterns. Examples include outdoor classes on focusing on farm care or practical skill-building disciplines like construction. These are positive signs of a curriculum becoming more flexible in order to best support all young people. Parents, carers and schools are currently concerned however about the changes to Element 3 funding and the impact this will have on them being able to access Alternative Provision in the future.

A further challenge in Norfolk, acknowledged by all parties, is the lack of specialist provision and the geography of the county. Specialist schools (or Resource Bases) may feel they are unable to meet a child's specific needs so at times the Local Authority is forced to name the local mainstream school on the EHC plan or a specialist school which is extremely far away.

In some cases, children with SEND face 100-mile, 4 hour long, round trips just to attend school each day. This leaves them not only physically tired but drained of the energy and resilience to maximise the benefits of a day in school.

This also creates additional financial costs every year. In 2023, Norfolk County Council reported that they spend approximately £40 million to fund school transportation for children with SEND. This is almost 12% of the £332 million that the Council received to fund schooling from 2023 – 2024.

We must also recognise the vital role of early years intervention and the transformative effect this can have for the long-term prospects of children with SEND, not only in terms of their education but for their future confidence and social skills.



Photo from SEND Forum hosted in May 2025

Outside of Education

Sadly, many young people with SEND also suffer from social anxiety or other mental health needs. Last year, Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs were listed as the primary need on 21% of EHC plans in England and 28% in Norfolk 12.

The consequence of this, especially where social anxiety is present, is that it reduces how often children engage with their peers and the types of activities they participate in. Ultimately, for some children, this can lead to a sense of isolation which negatively impacts their mental health.

This is compounded by the, at present, often lack of targeted activities on offer for children with SEND, in particular for non-verbal children. There is a real need to offer more opportunities for children with SEND to socialise through sport and other activities. Where that is not possible, non-specialist services need additional support and guidance to help them create spaces and services that cater for children with SEND.

" [The] School and Communities
Team got me through some very dark
times. So often I didn't feel believed
and had nowhere to turn, but they
understood and helped me get
through it. Sewell Park Academy has
started to do SEND cafes for parents
and offering ADHD coaching to the
children. We need more of this
support throughout Norfolk"

While some fantastic volunteer organisations have tried to fill the vacuum, they are constantly bidding for smaller

pots of money and they simply lack the resources to provide the level of support that is needed as a whole.

I met with so many parents and carers who told me that they wished they had more time to "just be a parent". Caring for children with enhanced SEND needs can be extremely demanding for them and other family members, including often older grandparents, to take a break from the demanding focus of care. Sadly, one of the best solutions to this is respite care, which has been cut by many local authorities under the spending pressures caused by the previous Government's cuts. The Nuffield Trust concludes that the number of carers able to access respite care has decreased by more than 24,000 between 2015/2016 and 2020/202113.

"Whilst the support in school has been of a good standard, the help and support at home has been lacking. Trying to get help for both myself and my daughter has been challenging and you feel as though you're continuously having to prove yourself. The funding for additional services is limited, so there isn't the capacity to meet the needs of every child with SEND. As such, you find yourself having to deal with things alone a lot of the time, which can put huge pressure on the family and mental health"



Recommendations

The Government should provide sustainable funding for SEND now and in the future

The additional £1 billion for SEND announced by the Chancellor for 2025-2026 was a welcome step. This will help address funding challenges after years of underfunding of SEND provisions. We must now commit to a sustainable funding model over the long term.

Put the child and the family first - we must build a SEND system around their needs

Families and children should come first; the SEND system should be redesigned and built around their needs. There must also be a renewed focus on early years provision and intervention. This child-first approach is essential to improving the trust parents and carers have that their child has been provided for with the right amount of support in and out of school.

Ensure the education system is appropriately equipped with the resources and expertise to deliver the majority of SEND provision in mainstream schools

Specialist schools will always be best placed to cater for the most complex needs. However, in order to successfully provide the majority of SEND provision within mainstream schooling, more support and training must be made available for teachers and support staff. Examples of alternative provision show the benefits of a flexible approach to the curriculum; continuing to enhance flexibility could offer improved support for children with additional needs.

Norfolk County Council should improve the cohesion of services and communication with families and ensure meaningful co-production takes place

This should include setting clear pathways and timelines for navigating the SEND system, a consistent single point of contact for parents / carers, and accountability from local authorities and schools.

Additional specialist provision should be provided in Norfolk

The amount of time some children spend travelling to schools that can meet their needs is, in many cases, unacceptable. Norfolk's unique geography must be better considered so that we provide more specialist provision closer to home. As a first step, I urge the County Council to relook at how the former Angel Road Junior School, in Norwich North, could be repurposed and reopened as a specialist school.



The people who work in SEND are dedicated, determined professionals who are essentially working with one arm tied behind their backs. There aren't enough staff across children's services to manage demand, there aren't enough specialist school places, there isn't the money for SEND support, waiting lists are so long the problems are escalating and escalating as there is no one to fix them



Closing Statement

Firstly, I want to acknowledge that parts of this report make for difficult and troubling reading, exposing in detail how the SEND crisis is unfolding in Norwich, from a six-year waiting list for diagnosis to the extraordinary logistical trial of sending your child to a specialist school a hundred miles away.

I hope this report is a useful contribution to a vital issue, providing a snapshot of what I have heard from my constituents. I want to thank everyone who has contributed to it – families, those with lived experience, schools, education providers, teachers and professionals.

It is clear that the system is in need of urgent and fundamental change.

Ultimately, we need a whole system reset, moving away from the adversarial system that far too many experience and towards one which puts the child and family first. One where the effective delivery of additional SEND provisions are built into the education system, rather than the add-on and ad-hoc approach which is too often relied upon and which is severely undermining confidence. One where parents and carers can simply be just that instead of having to spend all their time fighting for the support that their child is entitled to.

The recommendations provided suggest a practical pathway towards achieving this and addressing some of the specific issues that have been raised with me.

Funding is a vital part of this picture, as is ensuring that policy continuously evolves to deliver the best possible support for children with SEND and their families. Change is long overdue and I know the Government is committed to getting SEND reform right so it works for all families and children.

I will continue to engage closely with constituents on this issue to ensure that their voices are heard at the top of Government and with the local authority, and to make sure that Norwich and Norfolk have the resources to cater for all of our children, no matter the extent of their needs.



Mull.



Alice outside the former Angel Road Junior School, which she is campaigning to turn into a specialist school

Footnotes and References

Foreword

(1) Includes state-funded nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, non-maintained special schools, state-funded alternative provision schools and independent schools.

Department for Education (2025), 'Special educational needs in England'. Available at: education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25

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(4) Insight & Analytics (2025), 'Norfolk Special Educational Needs and/or Disability Joint Strategic Needs Assessment'. Available at: www.norfolkinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/SEND_JSNA_v1.0_Published.pdf

Diagnosis

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Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans

(6) UK Parliament (2025), 'Solving the SEND crisis: report calls for culture shift and funding to make mainstream education genuinely inclusive'.

Available at: <u>committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-</u> <u>committee/news/209313/solving-the-send-crisis-report-calls-for-culture-shift-and-funding-to-make-mainstream-education-genuinely-inclusive/</u>

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czJKcaeAi5tUFL1DTL2UE4zNRBcoShgo=Xsr41EcWBa9mVIZIP30NDs1cEg%2Fd8Gyt8gH718MIEnBQS2F
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wmoAfeNQ16B2MHuCpMRKZMwaG1PaO=ctNJFf55vVA%3D

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- **(9)** IPPR (2024), 'Revealed: School exclusions and suspensions rise by a fifth last year, finds new report'. Available at: www.ippr.org/media-office/revealed-school-exclusions-and-suspensions-rise-by-a-fifth-last-year-finds-new-report?.com
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- (11) Department for Education, Norfolk. Available here: <u>skillsfunding.service.gov.uk/view-latest-funding/local-authority/statement/926</u>

Outside of Education

- (12) GOV.UK (2025), "Number of education, health (EHC) plans as at January each year, by their primary type of need' from 'Education, health and care plans". Available at: e4ab-08de00c7c93c
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