
TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

SEND funding and the early years
sector

CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Key findings | 3 |
| Background | 4 |
| Methodology | 6 |
| Survey results | 7 |
| Conclusion and recommendations | 22 |
| Appendix: full results | 25 |

KEY FINDINGS

Of all respondents providing care and education to children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND):

- **92%** have had to fund additional support for children with SEND out of their own pockets, with **53%** saying they do so 'regularly'. Of those that have had to fund additional support themselves, **84%** said it has had a negative financial impact on their setting.
- **40%** said they don't receive funding specifically to support SEND provision.
- **74%** said the number of children at their setting with SEND that has been formally identified has increased over the last two years.
- **14%** expect the number of places for children with SEND they are able to provide to decrease going forward. Within this, not being able to afford the number of staff members needed (**84%**), insufficient SEND funding (**77%**) and inadequate overall early years funding (**76%**) were the most commonly-cited contributing factors.
- **72%** have never declined a place to a child with SEND. Of those that have declined, not having enough staff (**74%**), not being able to afford to deliver appropriate care (**51%**) and not feeling able to keep the children safe (**43%**) were the most commonly-cited factors.
- **60%** said that the Covid-19 pandemic had had a negative impact on their ability to deliver care and education to children with SEND, with around one in six (**17%**) describing that impact as 'very negative'.

Of those respondents receiving additional funding for SEND provision:

- **87%** said that the SEND funding they receive, along with their early years rate, isn't enough to provide the quality of care for children with SEND that they want. Within this, **79%** said this was due to both the SEND funding level and the general early years funding rate (**8%** said it was solely due to the EY funding rate and **13%** said it was solely due to insufficient SEND funding).
- **23%** regularly experience delays in receiving SEND funding.

BACKGROUND

What is SEND?

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice states that a child or young person has special educational needs if they have “a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her”. Children’s special educational needs are generally thought of in four broad areas of need and support: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health; and sensory and/or physical needs.

The Equality Act defines disability as “a physical or mental impairment [where] the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [a person’s] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”.

The term SEND can be used to refer to children who have both special educational needs and disabilities; however, for the purposes of this report, we will use the term more broadly to refer to children who have either special educational needs or disabilities, as well as those who have both.

SEND and the early years

According to the Department for Education’s (DfE’s) *Provision for children under five years of age in England: January 2021*, 6.3% of three- and four-year-olds and 3.5% of two-year-olds accessing the 15-hour funded entitlement have special educational needs (SEN), as do 2.8% of three- and four-year-olds accessing the extended (30-hour) funded entitlement. However, these statistics do not include children with disabilities, nor do they include children with SEN who are not accessing the funded entitlement.

Separately, the DfE’s *Childcare and Early Years Provider Survey 2021* reports that the vast majority of early years group settings – 73% of private providers, 77% of voluntary, 76% of school nurseries and 100% of maintained nursery schools – have at least one child with SEND on roll. For childminders, who largely operate on their own and often do not have additional staffing support, this falls to 13%.

Early years SEND funding

While schools receive what is called a 'notional SEND budget' – that is, an identified amount of money within a school's total budget – to help meet the additional needs of children with SEND, early years providers have to meet the needs of most children with SEND out of their core budget. It is only if a child's needs cannot be met from this budget that providers can apply for additional funding. Such funding comes through a number of channels:

- Disability access funding, which was introduced in April 2017, is funding from central government

aimed at supporting three- and four-year-olds with disabilities to access the funded entitlement. Early years providers delivering care and education to eligible children receive a one-off payment of £615 per child per year from government (set to increase to £800 a year in April 2022), and can use the funding to, for example, make adjustments to their setting. Families of disabled children must be in receipt of the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for settings to be eligible for disability access funding.

- Also introduced in April 2017, SEN inclusion funding is a dedicated funding pot to support the provision of early years care and education for children aged three or four taking up the funded entitlement who have ‘lower-level or emerging SEN’. All local authorities are required to have an inclusion fund and must fund it themselves from either the early years funding block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) or the high needs funding block of the DSG, or a mixture of both. Local authorities are expected to pass the majority of their inclusion fund to early years providers in the form of ‘top-up grants’ on a case-by-case basis, although they are also permitted to use part of this fund to support specialist SEN services in their local area.
- Children aged 0-5 with more complex needs, and those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), can receive funding via their local authority’s high needs block.
- Children aged two in receipt of DLA or who have an EHCP are also eligible for 15 hours a week of funded provision (the ‘two-year-old entitlement’).

Approaches to funding SEND provision in the early years differ from local authority to local authority. Some councils offer additional non-statutory support: for example, additional SEND funding for children aged two. Similarly, some councils provide SEND funding for all the funded hours a child is taking up at a setting, while others only provide SEND funding for a proportion of these hours.

Over recent years, there has been a growing awareness – among both the public and policymakers – of concerns about the adequacy of early years funding in England. At the same time, there has been an increasing focus on SEND provision and funding across the country; however, that focus has primarily been on children of formal school age and above. In September 2019, the government launched a review into support for children with SEND. However, it is notable that the initial aims of this review included “equip[ing] staff in schools and colleges to respond effectively to [families’] needs,” with little mention of the early years.

This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the key issues around funding for SEND provision in the early years sector, and to highlight the need for greater government support at this early stage of children’s educational journeys.

METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted online between 31 January and 10 February 2022, and received 1,331 responses.

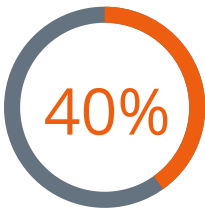
Respondents comprised of pre-schools (**59%**), nurseries (**29%**), childminders (**4%**), and a small number of children's centres, primary school nursery classes, maintained nursery schools, out-of-hours clubs, reception classes, local authority, area Sencos, baby and toddler groups, and specialist SEND provision (**1%** each).

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey results paint a clear picture of an early years sector struggling to remain sustainable while delivering quality care and education to children with SEND.

Perhaps the most notable finding from this research is that a significant minority (40%) of respondents delivering care and education to children with SEND aren't receiving any additional funding for doing so. Analysis of the qualitative survey responses to this question reveals several reasons for this.

Firstly, many providers state that they are caring for children who have SEND but are not eligible for additional funding. A number of respondents noted that SEND funding is often limited to three- and four-year-olds, meaning that younger children can miss out, even if the need for additional support has been identified at this early stage. One respondent commented: "Children are only entitled to funding the term after their third birthday [but] needs are being recognised at a much earlier age." Another



of respondents caring for children with SEND aren't receiving additional funding

said: "Assessment of these children with SEND does not tend to start until they are three – we pick up concerns with our two-year-olds."

Similarly, a number of providers also pointed out that additional SEND funding is widely limited to children receiving one of the funded entitlement offers, and so children with SEND who do not fall into this category – most commonly, non-funded two-year-olds – are not able to receive funding. One respondent said: "Children who are not yet eligible for three- and four-year-old funding are not entitled to any SEND funding. Therefore a two-year-old with emerging or significant needs cannot have extra support as they don't fall into the right age band for financial support. I have raised this many times at county level to be told that the SEND funding comes from the three- and four-year-old funding pot."

Another common reason given by respondents for not receiving SEND funding was that the level of need of the child or children in their care did not meet the local threshold for funding to be approved. One provider, whose application for additional funding was turned down by their local council, said: "They decided the needs were not severe enough, which has



"[There] needs to be a better system for obtaining funding from day one for children with known SEND, so we are able to support them in their transition into pre-school better."

SURVEY RESULTS

has had a hugely negative effect on the children and staff.” Another said that this was because “the children do not fit the boxes they want, or we have not had them long enough to provide all the evidence they need”, adding that “talking to us and the parents [and] meeting the child is not enough”.

Such an approach to funding is likely to make it increasingly difficult for early years providers to meet the needs of children with low- to moderate-level SEND in their care whose needs cannot be met from the setting’s core budget. This is likely to impact a high number of providers, given that two-thirds (66%) of survey respondents said that they delivered places to children with ‘mild’ special education needs (SEN), while most providers have few if any children on roll who have or are in the process of getting an EHCP (31% of respondents have no children with SEND that have, or are in the process of getting, an EHCP, while 61% have no more than 10% of children with SEND who have, or are in the process of getting, an EHCP).



Two in three respondents say they deliver places to children with mild SEN

The difficulties survey respondents cited in relation to receiving financial support for children with lower-level needs suggest that questions need to be asked about the efficacy

and accessibility of SEN inclusion funding, given that this is intended to support children with ‘lower-level’ or ‘emerging’ SEN whose needs cannot be met within a setting’s core funding.

A number of respondents also stated that they have actively chosen not to apply for additional SEND funding. This was most commonly because they feel the local threshold for funding excludes the children they would otherwise apply for, despite their need for extra support, or because they feel the process of doing so is too complex and the level of funding they are likely to receive as a result isn’t worth the work needed to apply.



“SEN is a total disaster. The paperwork involved means that I have to employ a member of staff to spend most of her time on SEN alone. There are so many hoops to jump through and so many children with needs that are being failed.”

One respondent said: “For over 10 years, I have never known funding to be readily available without a series of ‘provider hoops’ and ‘loopholes’ that make it impossible to maintain a claim and receive the financial support [to be] invested into staff and resources for the child.” Another commented: “The process of gaining

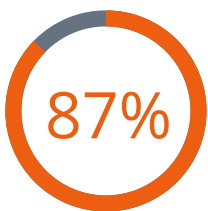
SURVEY RESULTS

support (both financial and practical) is a long-drawn-out process, involving lots of paperwork – most of which is repeated from form to form. This makes it far too difficult for settings to access it and the ones who suffer are the children.”

Concerns around the length of the SEND funding application process were also frequently raised by respondents in qualitative responses through the survey and are explored in more detailed later in this report (see page 12).

INADEQUATE FUNDING

As the results of the survey make clear, even those early years providers who do receive additional SEND funding on top of their general early years funding rate still widely view overall financial support for delivering care and education for children with SEND to be wholly insufficient. Nearly nine in 10 (**87%**) of these respondents stated that current levels of SEND funding, alongside current levels of early years funding, aren’t enough to provide the quality of care for children with SEND that they want.



of respondents receiving SEND funding say that current levels of funding are insufficient

It is important to note that in most cases, it is the combination of both these factors that is creating

difficulties for providers: **79%** said that they were struggling due to both the SEND funding level and the general early years funding rate, while only **8%** said it was solely due to the early years funding rate and **13%** said it was solely due to insufficient SEND funding.

One respondent said: “Even with the long-awaited increase to the FEEE [free early education entitlement] from April, it is still insufficient to cover the 'normal' running costs of a high-quality setting, with the additional employment costs of pensions, the continual increases to the minimum wage and the rising costs of utilities. SEND funding is even worse and is quite insulting to be honest; it doesn't even scratch the surface of what it costs to provide children with the additional support they need, let alone the huge amount of time we spend on making resources, admin, meetings and reviews.”

The wider early years funding challenges facing the sector are, by now, well-documented, and such concerns are reinforced by the findings of this survey: **73%** of respondents delivering funded two-year-old places stated that the funding received from government does not meet the cost of delivering a place, while **83%** of those delivering funded three- and four-year-old places stated the same.

Looking at funding for SEND provision specifically, many respondents highlighted the fact that current SEND funding levels fail to

SURVEY RESULTS

match the costs of the additional, and often more specialist, staff needed to meet the higher levels of support required for young children with SEND. One survey respondent commented: “Quality specialist staff are crucial to quality inclusive practice and care for individual children. A combination of early years funding and SEND funding is not sufficient to include the individual quality support for SEND children in line with ongoing rising national costs and recognition of specialist staff qualifications through pay.”



“[Funding] does not cover the cost of additional staff to offer small group and individual interventions.”

A number of respondents pointed out that this financial pressure is becoming even more pronounced as a result of sustained increases in the national living and minimum wages, and other associated staffing costs such as pension contributions. One stated: “Increases to minimum wage rates have meant the difference between the funding rate and SEND funding is far greater than ever. We used to be in a position to supplement the income to provide specialised play equipment ourselves, but this is getting much harder.”

Respondents also pointed out that SEND funding

often doesn’t cover the indirect costs of providing care and education to children with SEND – for example, time spent liaising with external agencies and professionals, or completing required paperwork. One provider commented: “The SEND funding we can apply for doesn’t account for the extra admin time it takes to apply. The hours needed to submit an EHCP are numerous and these are not covered by any funding.”

Another concern that was repeatedly raised in qualitative responses to the survey was that often, the number of hours of SEND funding that a provider receives for an eligible child does not match the total number of hours that child takes up.

One respondent said: “We have two children who have 30 hours funding and attend for 30 hours but we only receive SEND funding for 15 hours. This means I am paying for one-to-one support for an extra 15 hours a week.” Similarly, another respondent stated: “A child attending 30 hours will only get 15 hours inclusion funding – we have to cover the remaining cost. [For] children that attend 15 hours, we only receive 80% and we must fund the remaining hours ourselves.”

Another said: “Last year we did have a child with SEND and they were funded the equivalent of five hours a week term-time only. They were an all-year round child, so this did not go very far to support their needs.”

SURVEY RESULTS



“It is appalling that we are only funded for a maximum of 15 hours for SEND children, when a child is entitled to attend for 30 hours.”

COMPLEX FUNDING PROCESS

Alongside concerns about the inadequacy of early years and SEND funding, and the ability to access additional support for all children who need it, the survey also highlighted widespread dissatisfaction with the actual process of applying for funding and the impact that this has on providers’ ability to sustainably deliver care and education.



“Our LA decides who gets what by application only, so if you are really good at form-filling, the child will get funding, and if you aren't, they get very little.”

Many respondents described the process of applying for SEND funding as ‘confusing’ and ‘complex’. One respondent said that the “complicated application process for SEND funding” eats into “limited admin time”. Another commented: “The forms that need filling in before we can access any help from the LA are

very long, drawn-out and confusing. We have asked for help with the paperwork but that has not happened. The funding deadlines are at the beginning of each term for the following term so we have missed the deadline for next term.”

A number of respondents also described the application process as ‘time-consuming’, citing the need to gather extensive evidence and liaise with multiple agencies as key contributing factors to this. One provider, who is not currently in receipt of any SEND funding, said: “We are still completing assessments and collating information from other agencies which is proving very difficult – [there is] very little multi-agency working.” Another said: “The level of paperwork and outside agency information required takes a ridiculous amount of time.” Another commented: “There needs to be a more integrated multi-agency approach which can deliver timely assessment and identification ... which is appropriately funded.”

Some respondents additionally pointed out that the administrative requirements involved in supporting children with SEND can result in significant additional costs for providers. One said: “I pay a member of staff to do the SEND administration at least one day a week, which equates to £80 a week which we do not get funding for. The Senco also regularly has to attend or host meetings, take phone calls etc, which takes them away from the rooms.” Another similarly said: “[There are] huge hidden costs, with loads of paperwork and meetings on

SURVEY RESULTS

top of funded hours [and] in management support.”

Qualitative responses to the survey also highlighted that the pressure that this complicated and lengthy process is putting on early years providers has been exacerbated by a widespread reduction in local authority area Sencos (who provide support and advice to early years providers) across the country. One respondent said: “Since there was the big change in the structure of accessing help for SEND children, by the removal of the area Senco, it has been harder to get help to access funding.”

FUNDING DELAYS

A key concern raised by respondents throughout the survey was the impact of SEND funding delays. **56%** of those in receipt of SEND funding said they had previously experienced delays in receiving it, with **23%** saying this happens ‘regularly’. It should be noted that in the majority of responses, these comments related specifically to delays in being able to apply for SEND funding, rather than delays in receiving funding once an application had been approved, though a small number of respondents did point to this being a problem as well.

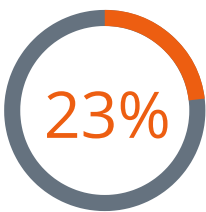


“I have to chase up our LA each month. This month, for example, [the funding payment] was four weeks late”.

Several providers pointed to the fact that settings are often unable to apply for funding until a child has started at a setting even if they know that the child will require additional support at an earlier stage, and that this can lead to delays in getting the required support further down the line.

One respondent said: “Despite knowing children are entering [the] setting with SEN, funding has to be applied for once evidence is gathered and submitted by the setting once the child starts. This can be a lengthy process for some children.”

Another said: “When children start at the nursery who have not been identified with needs, the process of getting to the point of being able to apply for SENIF [special educational needs inclusion funding] is arduous. We have to wait for the EYST [Early Years Support Team] application to be evidenced and accepted, wait for the child to be observed at home, then at nursery, then wait for the EYST who are already overloaded with cases, to then send the EYST report to us so



of respondents in receipt of SEND funding regularly experience delays in receiving it

SURVEY RESULTS

that we can then attach it to the evidence for the SENIF application, which is then reviewed at set intervals. During this long time period, the child is missing out on learning in key areas [and] missing out on activities due to a lack of staff and [us] barely meeting the room ratios as it is.”



“We can’t get EIF [early intervention funding] until a child is at our setting which is frustrating as we have concerns regarding their safety without additional staffing.”

A number of respondents also commented that SEND funding can be delayed because it is subject to approval by a funding panel that only meets at set intervals. One described the “inherent delay” because “the funding panel only meets once or twice a term”. Another said: “[The] under 5 SEND group only meets once a term. It can take two terms to receive support after we first identify a need.”

These delays can be made all the more stressful by a lack of information about whether or not an application has been successful, and a lack of clarity on how much funding a setting will receive if it has been successful. One respondent said: “It’s not really the delay in receiving the money that causes the issues we have with the LA SEN premium or inclusion; it is more the lack of

information on whether or not the panel have decided to honour our application or at what rate until well into the term that it is needed. How do we know whether we can afford to take on additional support staff for those with significant needs or not? It is impossible to budget or carry out any form of financial forecast which can be vital to our future sustainability, especially when [a quarter] of our children at present are needing some level of additional support.”

Another said: “We always receive [SEND funding] towards the end of the term in which it is due and we never know how much or even if we will receive the funding, which means that we have to take a gamble and hope that we get it.” Similarly, another said: “Have to apply each term. Never know what we are getting or which child it is for if there are multiple applications. Always have to chase it.”



“We never know when we are going to receive SEN funding or how much we are going to get until it is paid into the bank.”

Some respondents also stated that even when funding is finally approved and allocated, it is normally not backdated to cover the period that the child has been at a setting, and as a

SURVEY RESULTS

result, settings have to bear the cost of delivering a higher level of care in the interim themselves.

One respondent said: “The application process and allocation is not backdated to the point where the child's needs had been identified and they had started at the setting.”

Another said: “We have successfully achieved EHCPs for two children in the past two years – we got the funding in June, they left to go to school in the July! There is no back pay.”

With the majority of SEND funding targeted at three- and four-year-olds, delays in being able to apply for additional financial support means that, often, children have moved to school by the time their funding is approved. A significant number of survey respondents commented that, as a result, they feel that they are often applying for funding that is highly unlikely to benefit their own setting or provision.

One provider said: “We identify children but by the time they have been seen by professionals, they have moved on to the next stage of their education so we have to manage without any additional funding.”

Another said: “It takes at least two years to get an EHCP through our county. Children join us at two [and] although early identification takes place here, the support to get a child diagnosed is almost non-existent... By the time the EHCP goes to panel, the children are in school.”

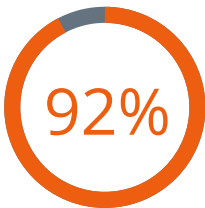
Another commented: “Early years providers are expected to do all the tracking, form-filling, triage panels for help, lead Early Helps [and] complete EHCP applications before a child starts school, so that the pot of money is there for the school when the child starts. Nothing is given to compensate any early years provider for the time and effort in doing all of this.”



“The process is far too slow and paper-heavy. EHCPs take months and sometimes don’t get granted until the child has left the setting.”

SELF-FUNDING

The combination of the aforementioned factors – lack of adequate funding, narrow eligibility criteria and delays in receiving funding which is not subsequently backdated – means that early years providers often don’t receive the money to deliver SEND provision when they need it.



of respondents delivering SEND provision have had to fund this out of their own pockets

As a result, the vast majority (**92%**) of respondents providing care and education to children with SEND say they have previously

SURVEY RESULTS

had to fund additional support for those children out of their own pockets, with more than half (53%) saying that they do so 'regularly'. One respondent said: "By the time we receive any funding for children with SEND (if we are fortunate to have made a 'good enough case'), we have already spent a huge amount of time and money supporting these children, and many hours spent completing copious amounts of paperwork, at our own cost, and often to the detriment of other children."

Another commented: "The funding application process is extremely lengthy and we have usually been supporting children for several months before we can even start applying." Similarly, another said: "It takes around 6-12 months to provide sufficient paperwork [and] call in and receive help from outside professionals before we can apply. We have had to support three children for at least this time before any financial help is available."



"There has not been a time over the past two years that I have not had to fund children with SEND out of my own pocket."

"[We are] always topping up support of SEND children, without which they wouldn't get the right amount of care and support."

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority (84%) of those who reported having to fund SEND support out of their own pockets said that it has had a negative financial impact on their setting, with a number of respondents stating that they have had to rely on the setting's financial reserves to fund this support. One respondent said: "We have had to use contingency funds, set aside for redundancies and for keeping us afloat if we ever lost income (like the pandemic)." Another said: "We are lucky that we have been able to fund this up to now but it has depleted our reserves." Similarly, another provider commented: "We are using our savings to fund these children as the local authority says if we have space, we must take them as they have not received an official assessment."



"We have used our reserve money to fund our SEND children. That has run out and now we don't have a back-up to help support us through the Covid times."

A number of respondents also pointed out that a lack of adequate SEND funding often has a wider impact on the whole setting as it can force providers to divert resources from elsewhere. One charity setting commented: "We endeavour to provide provision for all children and we have had to divert money

SURVEY RESULTS

towards supporting those children with additional needs away from things that we normally fund or purchase – for example, we have really clawed back our spending on resources.”

Other respondents also noted the impact of this on their ability to increase staff wages, with one saying: “We would like to pay our high-quality staff more per hour but we have to spend money on putting more staff in place as the legal ratios are not sufficient for the level of need of our children.” Another said: “Without us providing funding, the children could not progress. However, the loss has to be met somewhere. No one in the setting will let any of the children suffer, so it hits our ability to be able to increase staff wages, resulting in staff having to survive on minimum wage. With their level of expertise, it is not acceptable for them to be treated in this way. With the cost of living skyrocketing, it is unsustainable.”

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Unsurprisingly, the majority (**60%**) of respondents supporting children with SEND said that they felt that the Covid-19 pandemic had had a negative impact on their ability to deliver care and education to those children, with around one in six (**17%**) saying that it had had a ‘very negative’ impact.

Many of the qualitative survey responses noted the lack of contact with external bodies and agencies as a particularly negative consequence

of the pandemic. One respondent said: “Getting external agencies in has been impossible, meaning children struggle to get the support needed which is incredibly frustrating when we're expected to do everything.” Similarly, another commented: “[We] cannot get access to professionals so have had to be social workers, health visitors, speech and language therapists throughout the pandemic. [There has been] no real help for early years settings, despite being expected to remain open.”

A number of respondents also pointed out that the shift to virtual assessments during the pandemic has led to many children not being assessed as thoroughly or fairly as they otherwise might have. As put by one provider: “Covid had a huge impact on the support that we could get. We could not get anyone from portage to come out; it was telephone conversations only. This meant that they did not ever meet the child or see their needs in person. EHCPs were repeatedly refused, even for a looked-after child with global delay and significant learning needs. It took 18 months of fighting and eventually mediation meetings to get the child the help that they deserved; by this time, he had moved up to primary school.”

Similarly, another provider who believes that 25% of children at their setting would benefit from an EHCP, but whose applications are being declined, said: “The people who are declining have not met these children and if they were to observe them in the setting, I am

SURVEY RESULTS

sure the outcome for these children would be different.”



“Zoom [meetings] and telephone calls only give part of the full picture with the children.”

A number of respondents additionally commented that the practice of conducting assessments remotely is still continuing, despite the easing of Covid restrictions. One said: “Even now, professionals are conducting a huge amount of appointments via Zoom, which has a hugely negative impact on being able to get a real picture of that child.”

Another significant impact of the pandemic raised by survey respondents was the backlog within relevant services, including both assessment and support services. One commented: “The services are extremely stretched due to the Covid backlog. Any new SEN children, their families and settings are waiting much, much longer to receive the support that is needed.” Another said: “Professionals have an enormous backlog – 18 months in some cases – to assess children for diagnosis. How can a setting provide care for a child with additional needs with no diagnosis or support from professionals? Without diagnosis,

there is no intervention or support.”

Another important point raised by respondents is that a number of children with SEND were shielding through large proportions of the pandemic, something that has had a significant impact on the care and education that they were able to receive. One commented: “Not seeing the children if parents chose to keep them away has led to regression and a tough time reintroducing children.”



“Children with SEND may (although not always) have additional health needs which makes them vulnerable to infection. Their families may also be reluctant to bring them to sessions.”

A small number of respondents also noted that the pandemic has led to delays in children’s additional needs being identified, as many parents and carers have had little interaction with other children of a similar age. One said: “Because the children have been at home mostly with their main carer, their carers think their level of development is ok and their behaviour is just the norm, but when they start at a setting and start mixing more, they realise that their child isn't where they are supposed to be developmentally.”

SURVEY RESULTS

A particularly common observation made by respondents in qualitative survey responses is that there has been a notable increase in the number of children presenting with SEND since the onset of the pandemic. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents providing care and education to children with SEND said that the number of children with SEND that had been formally identified had increased over the past two years, while more than eight in 10 (82%) said there had also been an increase in children in their setting who they felt may have SEND that hadn't yet been formally identified.

One provider estimated that the number of children with SEND and speech and language concerns had increased by 70% over the course of the pandemic. Another said: "Since September 2021, we have had a huge influx of children join the setting with mild to severe additional needs and parents desperate for help from outside agencies and struggling to get support."

Similarly, another respondent commented: "[We have a] higher number of children entering the setting with very noticeable delays in development in social communication, expressive language and generally missing milestones. This has led to a very heavy SEN cohort within a mainstream setting that is not equipped to cope with the demand, i.e. staffing/resources. The district specialist centres are then full so these children are left in 'holding' in our setting where we are trying our best to meet their needs but feel like we are failing them!"

Some providers commented that it can be difficult to distinguish between what might be a potentially short-term effect of the pandemic on a child's development, and a more formal special education need. For example, one respondent said: "I feel that parents seem to be more worried that their children have SEND when that isn't the case. However, the pandemic has affected our ability to identify children with needs. For example, some children were born in the pandemic and have never been to an early years setting before. They can present with a developmental delay and it is our role as special educational needs teachers to unpick behaviours and decide if the child's behaviours are a result of the pandemic or a potential additional need."

Other providers commented that the difficulties in making such a distinction can also sometimes hinder the process of applying for funding and support. As put by one respondent: "[It is] more difficult to get support quickly as we need to prove that it is SEND and not just the impact of Covid that is causing the child's difficulties."

A number of respondents commented that the increase in the number of children presenting with additional needs which would not necessarily be considered to be special educational needs, or with other emotional or behavioural challenges as a result of the pandemic, is putting pressure on the early years workforce and, in some cases, preventing them

SURVEY RESULTS

from providing the level of support to children with SEND that they otherwise would.

One said: “There are a lot of children with social and emotional challenges – [I] wouldn't describe them as SEND but they have needs that require more time and focus, meaning if there is a child with SEND, there simply isn't enough staff care to go around.” Another similarly commented: “It has had a negative impact due to children who are considered to have no additional needs presenting very emotional and difficult behavioural needs stemming from the pandemic and possibly the result of being 'left' to their own devices when parents had to work from home. The additional support these children needed meant children with SEN did not always get the one-to-one they needed. The support was placed with distressed children and a focus on emotional wellbeing rather than SEN need.”



“Many children have emotionally been impacted by the pandemic, and more care and attention is required by them, reducing the amount of time and attention that can be given to children with SEN.”

One respondent also noted that the impact of the pandemic on the behaviour of all children had affected those with SEND in particular: “All

children have suffered with personal, social and emotional development during lockdowns as they could not socialise. This impacts on the children with SEND as all the children struggle with regulating emotions. Usually we can use the other children as role models for SEN behaviour, but cannot currently do this.”

FINANCIAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Unsurprisingly, a number of respondents pointed out that the financial impact of the pandemic on early years settings had also had a significant effect on SEND provision. One said: “We always do our best to support children with SEND but the financial impact of the pandemic has meant we have even less money available to provide a higher level of care or specific resources.”



“Covid has financially affected the setting, limiting what SEND support we're able to fund ourselves.”

Concerns over the impact of the pandemic on staff was another common theme among survey responses, with a number of providers pointing out the impact of additional pressures on the workforce. One commented: “Our staff are feeling pressured. We feel burnt out with the [amount] of paperwork and by providing

SURVEY RESULTS

one-to-one sessions to all our special needs children. We have to fill in paperwork out of our hours, plan resources, arrange meetings with parents, professionals etc. We chase up professionals for EHCP meetings, [are] always requesting educational psychologists, and also end up counselling parents when they are feeling low and confused.”

Recruitment and retention challenges in the sector – discussed in greater detail in the Alliance’s *Breaking Point* report – were also cited as having a negative impact on SEND provision in the early years. One provider commented: “The impact has mostly been financial; however, Covid has left us short-staffed and with staff leaving the sector. We are constantly chasing our tails trying to train new staff, recruit and keeping up with all the additional work handed over to us where other agencies are unable.” Another said: “We have lost staff due to lockdown restrictions, vaccination restrictions, moving abroad to be with family, moving out of early years due to pressure. [We are] struggling to recruit experienced motivated staff – funding [is] too low [and] salaries [are] too low.”

Similarly, another said: “The shortage of applicants for positions within the sector has been a factor for many years but it is now the worst we have ever experienced. SEND children often require higher ratios than those set out in the statutory framework and settings have somehow, without additional funding, made this work in some shape or form – [it’s] not as good as

it should be, but we’ve all muddled through. Muddling through was never ideal but we’re a long way from even being able to do that now.”

LOOKING AHEAD

The challenges facing early years providers supporting children with SEND are unlikely to ease anytime soon, with most respondents expecting the number of places they provide to children with SEND to increase (**32%**) or stay the same (**54%**) going forward.

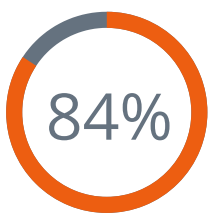


“We are already struggling, but cannot turn away a child who needs additional help. [It has a] massive impact, but we are inclusive and put the needs of families first.”

Despite the challenges currently facing settings, the majority of early years providers responding to our survey (**72%**) have never had to decline to offer a place to a child with SEND. That said, it remains notable that nearly one in six respondents (**14%**) expect the number of places that they are able to provide for children with SEND to fall going forward, and that only **1%** of those respondents think that a lack of demand for places will be a contributing factor. The most cited reasons for providers being unable to provide as many SEND places as they had previously were not being able to afford

SURVEY RESULTS

the number of staff members needed (mentioned by **84%** of this subsection of respondents), insufficient SEND funding (**77%**) and the overall early years funding rate being too low (**76%**).



of respondents who expect their number of SEND places to fall going forward cite a lack of adequate staff as a factor

The challenges facing providers are well summed-up by one respondent: “We have always worked so incredibly diligently to support our children with SEND and we provide the absolute best we can to support them, but with the lack of funding available, this is just not sustainable. Staff morale is often low as we try to manage under difficult circumstances, and without a shadow of a doubt, all other children in the setting have suffered as we have had to pool so many resources, including staff, into supporting our children with SEND. We could be doing so much more for ALL our children if we received money specifically to help us offer places to children with SEND, without it having to impact on our provision as a whole.”

As the government looks to publish the long-awaited SEND Review, it is clear that far greater support is needed to ensure that early years professionals can continue to give all children, including those with SEND, the support, care and education they both need and deserve.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All children with SEND are entitled to the same opportunities as their peers, and no child with SEND should be prevented from accessing a quality early years education. At the same time, early years providers are being put in an increasingly impossible position: being required to deliver quality of provision and equality of access, without having timely enough, or sufficient, funding to do so.

The Early Years Alliance recognises that the challenges that need to be overcome go beyond funding alone – but the fact remains: adequate funding plays a fundamental role in supporting early years providers to deliver consistently high-quality SEND provision.

The growing focus on SEND provision within government, including the current SEND Review, is welcome, but concerns remain that the role of the early years with respect to SEND, and the impact on providers, is being largely overlooked. This is despite the pivotal role that early years providers play in supporting children's early learning and development and especially in the early identification of additional needs. It is imperative that this changes going forward and that early years SEND provision is seen as equally important as SEND provision in primary, secondary and further education during the policymaking process.

Current estimates suggest that there is a high needs funding deficit of more than £2 billion and while the government has announced additional funding of £2.6 billion for new school places for children with SEND, announcements on additional SEND funding for the early years sector have been less forthcoming.

Of course, discussions around the adequacy and efficacy of early years SEND funding cannot be held in isolation and must factor in the wider financial pressures facing childcare providers at present. With early years businesses set to endure national living and minimum wage increases of more than 6% in April 2022, while local authority funding early years rates are set to increase by just over 3%, the pressures on all providers, and particularly those delivering care to children with SEND, are set to grow substantially. As such, for providers to be able to deliver long-term, sustainable, quality provision to all children in their care, including those with SEND, wider issues of early years underfunding must be tackled and the Alliance will continue to campaign in this regard.

Additionally, issues around a lack of support from local authorities, such as the widespread reduction in area Sencos, cannot be addressed without tackling the issue of dwindling local authority budgets more generally, and this is something government must also consider if it truly wants to improve the nationwide SEND system in the long term. However, there remain a number of steps that the government could take in the medium term to help address at least some of the specific issues raised in this report.

- **Ensure that SEND funding matches the hours taken up by child**

If children require additional support, they require it for the entirety of their time at a setting, and that includes hours taken outside of funded entitlement hours. As such, any increase in SEND funding should ensure that providers are financially supported for all the hours a child takes up, not just a proportion.

- **Create a faster, simpler and more consistent process for applying for SEND funding**

The government should look to review and overhaul the SEND funding application process, and ensure the burden on providers is minimal, that support in making applications is available as needed and that there is a broadly consistent process across local authorities. This should include minimising requirements for providers to 're-apply' for funding for a child's whose needs or required support have not changed.

- **Ensure that SEND funding covers the application process**

Once an application for SEND funding has been approved, any payments should be backdated to the day that the setting in question started to deliver a place for the child or children, to ensure that no provider is left to cover this period out of their own pocket. If this application process is improved as per the previous recommendation, this will limit the amount of impact such a change would have.

- **Improve the clarity and transparency of the funding system**

All providers should be clear on what funding is available to which children in their care. As such, the government should ensure that all local authorities provide clear, accessible information to providers on funding levels and eligibility criteria in their area, particularly those who use a 'tiered' system of funding dependent on levels of need.

We recognise that these recommendations would represent a significant change to the current SEND early years funding system, but the alternative – leaving things as they are – simply cannot be an option.

Current indications from the SEND Review suggest a desire from government to move SEND interventions higher upstream in schools. As this survey demonstrates, there is already a model for this in early years but this provision must be adequately supported if it is to be delivered effectively in the long term.

Early years providers shouldn't have to choose between being inclusive and being sustainable. Decisive action by government is needed to ensure that, going forward, no provider will have to make such a choice again.



“I have been in education for over 15 years and every year I see more children with SEND. The support and facilities do not mirror this. The government need to give us more money for this and make funding more accessible to [early years settings] so that we can give more support to such children.”

“The system is broken and those in the most need are not receiving the support needed. It is completely short-sighted and it will eventually cost more down the road to support these children.”

APPENDIX: FULL RESULTS

How would you best describe where you work in the early years? Please choose the option closest to describing your provision.

Nursery: **29%**

Pre-school: **59%**

Childminder: **4%**

Maintained nursery school: **1%**

Primary school nursery class: **1%**

Out of hours club: **1%**

Children's centre: **1%**

Reception class: **1%**

Specialist SEND provision: **1%**

Local authority: **1%**

Area Senco: **1%**

Baby and toddler group: **1%**

Other: **3%**

Do you offer any funded places for two-year-olds?

Yes: **90%**

No: **10%**

[If yes] Is the hourly rate of funding you receive from government for two-year-olds:

More than the cost of delivering places: **11%**

The same as the cost of delivering places: **16%**

Less than the cost of delivering places: **73%**

Do you offer government funded places for three- and four-year-olds?

Yes, universal (15-hour) places only: **7%**

Yes, 30-hour places only: **2%**

Yes, both 15-hour and 30-hours places: **88%**

No: **3%**

[If offering 30 hours option] How many hours per week does your local authority pay for support for children with SEND for?

None: **26%**

Less than 15 hours: **14%**

15 hours: **14%**

More than 15 hours but less than 30: **4%**

30 hours: **5%**

Varies: **28%**

Other: **9%**

[If offering funded places to three- and four-year-olds] Is the hourly rate of funding you receive from government for three- and four-year-olds:

More than the cost of delivering places: **4%**

The same as the cost of delivering places: **13%**

Less than the cost of delivering places: **83%**

Do you currently deliver places to any children you consider to have the following (please select all that apply):

Mild special educational needs: **66%**

Moderate special educational needs: **64%**

Significant special education needs: **63%**

Mild disabilities: **25%**

Moderate disabilities: **22%**

Significant disabilities: **19%**

I/We do not currently have any children with SEND enrolled: **7%**

Other: **3%**

[If no children with SEND enrolled] Why do you not currently have any children with SEND enrolled at your setting? Please select all that apply.

No requests for places for children with SEND: **92%**

Don't have the number of staff members needed to deliver appropriate care: **6%**

Cannot afford to deliver appropriate care: **4%**

Don't have appropriate equipment/resources to meet the children's needs: **4%**

Don't have staff with the necessary skills/expertise: **1%**

Don't feel able to keep the children safe: **1%**

Levels of paperwork and administrative demands are too high: **0%**

Other: **10%**

All the following questions were direct to those respondents who have children with SEND enrolled.

Approximately what proportion of children at your setting have special educational needs and / or disabilities that have been formally identified?

- 1 - 10%: **69%**
- 11 - 25%: **23%**
- 26 - 50%: **6%**
- 51 - 75%: **1%**
- 76 - 99%: **0%**
- 100%: **1%**

Approximately what proportion of children at your setting do you feel may have special educational needs and / or disabilities that have not yet been formally identified?

- 1 - 10%: **57%**
- 11 - 25%: **32%**
- 26 - 50%: **9%**
- 51 - 75%: **2%**
- 76 - 99%: **0%**
- 100%: **0%**

Over the last two years, has the number of children with SEND (that has been formally identified) in your setting:

- Increased significantly: **43%**
- Increased slightly: **31%**
- Remained roughly unchanged: **22%**
- Decreased slightly: **2%**
- Decreased significantly: **2%**

Over the last two years, has the number of children at your setting who you feel may have SEND that has not yet been formally identified:

- Increased significantly: **48%**
- Increased slightly: **34%**
- Remained roughly unchanged: **17%**
- Decreased slightly: **0%**
- Decreased significantly: **1%**

What proportion of children with SEND at your setting have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or are in the process of getting an EHCP?

None: **31%**
1 – 10%: **61%**
11 – 25%: **4%**
26 – 50%: **1%**
51 – 75%: **0%**
76 – 99%: **1%**
100%: **1%**

Over the past two years, have you ever had to decline to offer a place to a child with SEND at your setting?

Yes, regularly: **2%**
Yes, on a limited number of occasions: **13%**
Yes, once: **13%**
No, never: **72%**

[If any yes option] Why was this? Please select all that apply.

Did not have enough staff to deliver appropriate care: **74%**
Could not afford to deliver appropriate care / insufficient funding: **51%**
Did not feel able to keep the child/children safe: **43%**
Did not have any available places at the setting: **32%**
Did not have the equipment/resources to meet the child's/children's needs: **25%**
Did not have staff with the necessary skills/expertise: **24%**
Levels of paperwork and administrative demands are too high: **19%**
Not enough physical space: **9%**
Other: **9%**

Do you receive funding specifically to support SEND provision?

Yes: **60%**
No: **40%**

[If Yes] What sources of SEND funding do you currently receive? Please select all that apply.

SEN inclusion funding (for children with lower level / emerging SEN): **64%**
Local authority SEN funding for children with higher / more complex needs: **50%**
Disability Access Funding (DAF): **50%**
Other LA authority SEND funding: **8%**
Other non-local authority SEND funding: **2%**

Does your local authority have bands for paying 'free entitlement' funding according to child's SEND need (for example, funding children considered high needs at a higher hourly rate)?

Yes: 20%

No: 36%

Unsure: 45%

Is the SEND funding you receive, along with your early years funding rate, enough to provide the quality of care you want to provide for children with SEND at your setting?

Yes: 13%

No: 87%

[If no] Is this mainly because:

Your early years funding rate is too low: 8%

The additional SEND funding available is not enough: 13%

Both of the above: 79%

Over the past two years, have you experienced any delays in receiving SEN funding?

Yes, regularly: 23%

Yes, on a limited number of occasions: 23%

Yes, once: 9%

No, never: 44%

Over the past two years, have you ever had to fund additional support for children with SEND out of your own pocket?

Yes, regularly: 53%

Yes, on a limited number of occasions: 24%

Yes, once: 6%

No, never: 8%

[If any Yes option] Has having to do so had a negative financial impact on your setting?

Yes: 84%

No: 16%

Going forward, do you expect that the number of places you are able to provide to children with SEND will:

Increase: 32%

Stay roughly the same: 54%

Decrease: 14%

[If decrease] Why do you think the number of places that you offer will decrease? Please select all that apply.

We cannot afford the number of staff members needed to provide current levels of care for children with SEND: **84%**

The additional SEND funding available is not enough: **77%**

The overall early years funding rate is too low: **76%**

Struggling to recruit staff with the appropriate skills: **60%**

The administration/paperwork related to providing care and support to children with SEND is too onerous: **54%**

It is too difficult to apply for SEND funding: **44%**

The demand for places for children with SEND is likely to fall: **1%**

Other: **10%**

What impact do you feel the Covid-19 pandemic has had on your ability to deliver care and education to children with SEND at your setting?

Very negative impact: **17%**

Somewhat negative impact: **43%**

Neither negative or positive impact: **38%**

Somewhat positive impact: **2%**

Very positive impact: **1%**