Support *shouldn't wait* for a diagnosis.

Why the law and the evidence already point to needs-led support in mainstream schools, and what stands in the way of doing it early.

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SUMMARY

- More than 1.85 million pupils in England, over one in five, now have an identified special educational need. Most of them (1.32 million) are supported in mainstream schools without an Education, Health and Care plan.
- Children referred for a neurodevelopmental assessment wait, on average, more than two years from referral to diagnosis. Around 400,000 children were waiting for a first appointment at the end of 2022/23.
- The law does not require a diagnosis before a school provides support. Statutory guidance is explicit on this point.
- The evidence on what works in mainstream classrooms, led by the Education Endowment Foundation, starts from each child's needs, not from their label.
- The pressure is landing on class teachers and SENCOs. Overall teacher workload has eased slightly since 2023, but teachers report that the SEND part of the job has grown harder, and most SENCOs say they do not have the time the role needs.
- The question for the sector is not whether to support children before a diagnosis (the law and the evidence already say we should) but how schools can see a child's needs clearly and early enough to act, without adding to the load on the people doing the work.

01

The scale of need

In the 2025/26 school year, 1,858,327 pupils in England had an identified special educational need: 20.8% of all pupils. Of these, 538,547 (6.0%) had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan, up from 5.3% a year earlier, and 1,319,780 (14.8%) were on SEN Support, up from 14.2% [DfE 2026a].

Pupils in England, 2025/26	Pupils	Share	Year before
EHC plan	538,547	6.0%	5.3%
SEN Support	1,319,780	14.8%	14.2%
All identified SEN	**1,858,327**	**20.8%**	

Table 1. Pupils with special educational needs in England. Source: DfE 2026a.

Those numbers have risen every year since 2016. Whatever the reasons (better awareness, changing needs, the pressures on families and services) the practical consequence is the same: almost every class teacher in England now teaches several children who need something different from what the lesson would otherwise give them.

02

The wait

For many families, the route to understanding their child's needs runs through health services, and that route is slow.

The Children's Commissioner for England used NHS data to examine waiting times for neurodevelopmental assessment. Children diagnosed in community health services in 2022/23 and 2023/24 had waited, on average, 810 days (more than two years and three months) from referral to diagnosis. The average was 880 days for ADHD and 791 days for autism. An estimated 400,000 children, around 3% of all children in England, were waiting for a first contact with community health services linked to neurodevelopmental needs at the end of 2022/23 [Children's Commissioner 2024].

Separately, NHS England estimates that up to 549,000 people of all ages were waiting for an ADHD assessment in March 2025 [NHS England 2025].

Two years is a long time in a child's education.

A child referred at the start of Year 3 may not have an answer until Year 5 or later, by which point the gap in their learning, and often in their confidence, has had two years to grow.

03

The law already says: don't wait

It is easy to assume that support follows diagnosis. In England, legally, it does not.

A child has special educational needs if they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for special educational provision. As the House of Commons Library summarises the statutory guidance, "it is not necessary for particular medical conditions to have been assessed or diagnosed" for a child to meet that definition, or for support to be provided [House of Commons Library 2025].

Mainstream schools also have a statutory duty, under section 66 of the Children and Families Act 2014, to use their "best endeavours" to make sure pupils with SEN get the support they need [House of Commons Library 2025; DfE 2019].

The SEND Code of Practice sets out how: the graduated approach of Assess, Plan, Do, Review. Teachers and SENCOs build a picture of a child's needs, plan adaptations and targets with the family, put them in place, and review whether they are working, meeting parents at least three times a year [EEF 2020, citing the Code of Practice].

So the principle is settled. The difficulty is practice.

04

What waiting costs

When needs go unmet, the costs show up later, in school and beyond it.

- **Exclusion.** The government's 2019 review of school exclusion found that pupils on SEN Support were more than three times as likely to be excluded as pupils without SEN, and that pupils on SEN Support with social, emotional and mental health needs were 3.8 times more likely to be permanently excluded, after accounting for other factors. These figures are from 2016/17, but they remain the most detailed national analysis of the link [DfE 2019].
- **Disputes.** When families challenge decisions about statutory support, they almost always succeed at least in part: 98% of SEND tribunal appeals decided in 2022/23 were upheld at least in part [Children's Commissioner 2024], rising to 99% in 2024/25 [House of Commons Library 2025].
- **Who gets missed.** Identification is not evenly spread. One Australian study, modelling data from 1,711 autistic children seen at a single clinic, estimated that around 80% of autistic girls are still undiagnosed at 18, because of biases in how girls are first recognised and then diagnosed [McCrossin 2022]. It is a single-clinic estimate, so it indicates the scale of the problem rather than a national figure.
- **The long view.** A biopsychosocial view of neurodiversity holds that outcomes come from the interaction between a person and their environment, not from a condition alone [Doyle 2020]. That is the strongest argument for acting early: the environment is the part a school can change.

05

The classroom reality

The duty to support children sits, day to day, with class teachers and SENCOs. The evidence suggests that while teaching overall has become slightly more manageable, the SEND part of the job has become harder.

Overall workload is easing

The Department for Education's national survey of more than 10,000 teachers and leaders found average reported working hours fell to 46.9 a week in 2025, from 49.4 in 2023. The share agreeing their workload was acceptable rose to 26%, from 17% in 2023 [DfE 2025].

But SEND workload is rising

In a 2025 NASUWT survey of more than 3,300 members:

Class teachers reporting that...	Scope	Share
the number of pupils with SEN they teach had increased over five years	UK	90%
those needs had become more complex	UK	95%
they were spending more time adapting lessons	England	83%
the level of support for pupils with SEN had fallen over five years	England	51%
they always or mostly get the support they need to teach these pupils effectively	UK	c. 1 in 5

Table 2. Class teachers' reported experience of SEND workload. Source: NASUWT 2025a.

The pressure is sharpest for SENCOs. 82% of SENCOs in England said they do not have enough time for the role. In primary schools, 63% also have a class teaching commitment, and 71% of primary SENCOs are not part of their school's senior leadership team [NASUWT 2025b].

NASUWT's figures come from a self-selected survey of union members and should be read as teachers' reported experience, not national statistics. But they are consistent with each other, and with what schools describe: the person responsible for the "Assess" in Assess, Plan, Do, Review often has the least time to do it.

06

What the evidence says works

The Education Endowment Foundation's guidance on SEN in mainstream schools sets out five recommendations: a positive, supportive environment for all pupils; an ongoing, holistic understanding of each pupil's needs; access to high-quality teaching for all; carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions; and effective work with teaching assistants [EEF 2020].

Two points in that guidance matter most here.

First, it moves the focus from diagnosis to need. Diagnostic labels can help, and for some conditions they are essential, but the EEF's question is a practical one: "What does this individual pupil need in order to thrive?" [EEF 2020]

Second, it treats assessment as regular and purposeful rather than a one-off event, drawing on teachers, parents, specialists and the pupil themselves [EEF 2020]. Understanding a child is a continuing process, not a gate to pass through.

The EEF also names five teaching strategies to emphasise for pupils with SEND, which benefit the whole class: flexible grouping, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, explicit instruction, scaffolding, and using technology to support pupils with SEND [EEF 2020].

CASE IN POINT: PORTSMOUTH

There are local examples of needs-led practice working at scale. Portsmouth City Council piloted a non-diagnostic profiling approach that describes a child's needs across areas such as communication, attention, regulation and sensory processing, so that support can start without waiting for assessment. In an initial cohort of 51 children, the council reported improved wellbeing for children, families and practitioners, and new requests for diagnostic assessment fell from 301 in the first half of 2022 to 105 in the first half of 2024 [Children's Commissioner 2024]. It is one local evaluation, but it shows the approach is practical in England.

07

The honest caveats

A case for earlier, needs-led support has to take its risks seriously.

- **Identification varies between schools.** NFER's analysis finds that SEN Support relies on school-level judgement, and that a high SEN Support rate could reflect high need or over-identification [NFER 2025]. Earlier support needs consistent, evidence-based observation, not more labels.
- **Interventions are not a substitute for teaching.** The EEF warns that additional interventions cannot make up for weaknesses in everyday teaching, and that poorly used interventions can become a barrier to inclusion [EEF 2020].
- **Separation can creep in.** Over-reliance on teaching assistants can mean pupils with the greatest needs spend less time with their teacher and their peers [EEF 2020].
- **Mainstream is not automatically better.** The government reports that pupils with SEND in mainstream schools achieve around half a grade higher in English and maths GCSEs than comparable pupils in special schools [DfE 2026b]. That is encouraging, but it is a comparison between groups, not proof that every child would do better in mainstream.

08

The policy moment

National policy is moving in the same direction. The February 2026 SEND White Paper proposes Individual Support Plans for pupils with identified needs and a £1.8 billion "Experts at Hand" programme to bring specialists such as speech and language therapists and educational psychologists into mainstream schools [DfE 2026b]. A new Inclusive Mainstream Fund provides £400 million directly to mainstream schools in 2026/27 [DfE 2026c].

Meanwhile, schools still meet the first £6,000 of additional support for each pupil from their own budgets, a threshold set in 2013 and never uprated for inflation [House of Commons Library 2025; NFER 2025].

Whatever form the reforms finally take, they rest on one assumption: that mainstream schools can identify children's needs early and accurately enough to act on them. That is the part of the system under most strain.

09

Questions for the sector

We want this paper to start a conversation, not close one. Three questions we would value views on, from teachers, SENCOs, school leaders, parents and researchers:

1. What evidence do teachers and SENCOs actually need to start the "Assess" stage with confidence, without waiting for an outside assessment?

2. How can that evidence be gathered without adding to workload, ideally as part of ordinary lessons rather than on top of them?

3. How should schools describe a child's needs so that support can start early, without turning observation into an informal label?

Share your view at **pupilpower.com/contact**.

ABOUT PUPILPOWER

PupilPower is building tools to help teachers and SENCOs understand how each child engages with learning, through everyday, curriculum-aligned lessons, so that support can start from evidence rather than waiting for a label. PupilPower does not diagnose and is not a substitute for clinical assessment or professional judgement. Our aim is to give schools and families clearer, earlier observations to inform the support they choose to put in place.

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