One in five children – nearly two million – are considered by their school to have special educational needs (SEN), such that they need some form of help in class. One in thirty (275,000) needs more support than their school can normally provide. The local education authority (LEA) then draws up a ‘statement’ of their needs and the special provision to be made. Children’s needs arise from a wide range of difficulties – cognitive, physical, sensory, communication and behavioural.

Some children are more likely to be identified as having SEN – which in turn influences how much additional support they receive. Sixty-nine per cent of SEN resources are focused on children with statements. However, the likelihood of getting a statement appears to be influenced by a range of factors, including gender, ethnicity, family circumstances, and the approach taken by the school and LEA.

Early intervention can make a great difference, but this has yet to become the norm. LEAs’ responsibilities towards children with statements leave limited scope for wider preventative work with children with lower levels of need (1.6 million children have SEN but no statement). Arrangements for funding additional support in the early years sector remain incoherent and piecemeal. LEAs should seek to shift the balance of specialist advice and support towards ‘whole school’ preventative work – such as staff training in behavioural management. Government needs to fund LEAs so that they are able to extend SEN advice and support to early years settings.

Policy on inclusion expects that children with SEN should, as far as possible, be able to attend a local mainstream school. Most children with statements – 61 per cent in England, 76 per cent in Wales – are now educated in mainstream schools, but our research suggests that parents of children with SEN often have considerable difficulties with school admissions [EXHIBIT 1]. Their choice is limited by a lack of suitable provision locally and by unwelcoming attitudes in some schools. The move to include children with higher levels of need has progressed very slowly over the last decade and special schools will continue to play a significant role for the foreseeable future. LEA inclusion strategies should set out a clear timetable for developing the capacity of mainstream schools to meet a wider range of needs – and the future role of special schools in supporting this transition.

For their part, schools need to increase their accessibility in the broadest terms. Recent legislation requires them to plan strategically to this end and not to treat disabled pupils ‘less favourably’ than their classmates. While some have placed great emphasis on developing an inclusive ethos, others have far to go. Some children with SEN are regularly excluded from certain lessons and extra-curricular activities and most children who are permanently excluded from school have SEN – almost nine out of ten from primary schools and six out of ten from secondary schools.
Exhibit 1
Children experiencing difficulties with admissions
Children with behavioural difficulties have most problems getting into their parents’ chosen school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties very often</th>
<th>Difficulties often</th>
<th>Occasional difficulties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minority ethnic groups</td>
<td>Traveller children</td>
<td>Children in public care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excluded children</td>
<td>Emotional and behavioural difficulties</td>
<td>Autistic spectrum disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate learning difficulties</td>
<td>Severe learning difficulties</td>
<td>Profound and multiple learning difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Audit Commission survey of parent-partnership officers (45 responses)

6 Schools also need to be supported in seeking to respond to a wider range of needs. LEAs need to target specialist advice and support more effectively, increasing ‘whole school’ staff training and making more use of the expertise available in special schools. Government should establish clear expectations of the level of support and advice that health and social services should provide for children with SEN – four out of five LEAs reported shortfalls, in particular in therapies and child and adolescent mental health services.¹

7 Action is also needed to develop schools’ capacity to work more effectively with children with SEN. The more inclusive the classroom, the greater the diversity of needs among the pupils – and in turn, the greater the challenge to teachers. Many feel ill-equipped for this task. Top training priorities identified by school SEN co-ordinators (SENCOs) included curriculum differentiation, behaviour management and effective target setting for pupils with SEN. For their part, SENCOs need sufficient time, authority and support to fulfil their role effectively.

8 In contrast to the national focus on standards of attainment, little is known about how well children with SEN achieve in school. Barely one-half of LEAs are systematically monitoring schools’ performance on SEN and monitoring by governors is very variable.² LEAs should work with schools to develop rigorous monitoring arrangements, based on school self-review. This should enable schools to identify their own strengths and weakness and LEAs to target support and intervention more effectively. Governors should request regular updates including how resources are used and the progress made by pupils with SEN.
Effective monitoring is held back by a lack of relevant performance measures for many children with SEN. Although many sit national tests and GCSEs or equivalent, a sizeable minority are not entered or do not gain any passes because of their learning difficulty. New measures are needed to assess and recognise their achievements, beyond existing systems such as P-Scales and STEPs, which focus on the very lowest end of the attainment spectrum.

There is a real tension between the standards agenda and policy on inclusion. Almost every head teacher interviewed raised the issue of ‘league tables’ of school performance. This can have a damaging impact on staff morale and lies behind the reluctance of some to admit children with SEN. Government needs to create new systems for recognising and celebrating schools’ work with children with SEN – such as raising its profile in school inspection and flagship initiatives, or introducing awards for inclusive practice. Helping children to overcome the barriers to learning that they face should be a priority for all.

Time for a rethink?

When a child is identified as having SEN, a whole set of processes and structures come into operation. While these may be valuable in some ways, they imply a separateness that can be unhelpful. Although many children with SEN require additional support and a small minority need significant support, for the most part what they need is effective mainstream practice. Diversity is the new vision for comprehensive education and in this context, arguably the time has come to rethink SEN. Real and sustainable improvements for this sizeable group of children may best be achieved by focusing on mainstream practice and, in particular, on how our system of education responds to diversity. We need to reflect the interests of children with SEN in every aspect of education policy – from initial teacher training through to the inspection judgements made of schools. ‘SEN’ must truly become a mainstream issue.

Summary of recommendations

The report makes wide-ranging recommendations to schools, LEAs, health and social services and Government – forming a ten-point agenda for action:

1. to promote consistent practice in identifying and meeting children’s needs
2. to promote early intervention
3. to ensure that children with SEN are able to attend a local mainstream school, as far as possible
4. to promote effective inter-agency planning and provision
5. to enable children with SEN to join as fully as possible in the life of their school
6. to develop the skills and confidence of staff to respond to the wide range of children’s needs in classrooms today
7. to promote the effective allocation and management of SEN resources
8. to hold schools to account for their work on SEN
9. to provide a more meaningful basis for monitoring schools’ work on SEN
10. to recognise schools’ commitment to helping children with SEN to achieve.