



The Big SEND Conversation

The voice of the Special
Educational Needs &
Disabilities (SEND) Workforce

August 2026

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Executive Summary

A workforce that cares

The Big SEND Conversation 2025/26 is the largest regional workforce engagement exercise of its kind undertaken across London's SEND system. Conducted between December 2025 and March 2026, it gathered the views and experiences of 557 multi-agency SEND professionals alongside qualitative insights from focus groups involving a further 40 participants. Respondents represented local authorities, education settings, health services and partner organisations, providing a comprehensive picture of the workforce responsible for delivering SEND services across London.

The findings present a steadfast workforce that is experienced and motivated by improving outcomes for children and families. Despite system pressures, a large majority of respondents reported that they are able to make a difference through their work, with many describing SEND as a meaningful and rewarding career.

"SEND work is a great privilege." (SEND Case Worker)

Significant lived experience

More than half of respondents also bring lived experience of SEND, including as parent carers, demonstrating the depth of personal understanding and motivation that exists within the workforce. However, this fortitude is being tested by significant and sustained system pressures. The workforce continues to demonstrate resilience, but many respondents questioned whether current conditions are sustainable in the longer term with wellbeing highlighted as a trade-off.

Unsustainable workload and pressure

The strongest and most consistent message throughout the research is that workload and caseload pressures have reached unsustainable levels and poses the greatest threat to sustainability and successful reform implementation. Responses consistently described rising complexity, increased statutory demand, workforce shortages, fragmented systems, and shortages of specialist provision as major contributors to this accumulated pressure. Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) Coordinators, SEND Case Workers and SEND Coordinators reported some of the highest levels of workload concern, with many suggesting that current arrangements are no longer sustainable.

The research also highlights the extent to which bureaucracy and system complexity are affecting workforce capacity across the system. Respondents repeatedly described spending increasing amounts of time navigating processes, tribunals, administration and coordination activities, often at the expense of direct work with children, young people and families. Many felt that the current system is reactive rather than preventative, making it increasingly difficult to invest in early intervention and inclusive practice.



Hopeful for national SEND reform

There is strong support for the vision of national SEND reform and the principle of inclusion. Respondents want to see a more inclusive, equitable and less adversarial system, underpinned by earlier intervention, stronger and more joined-up multi-agency working, greater consistency and improved support for mainstream education settings. However, alongside this sits significant concern that reform ambitions will not be realised unless workforce capacity is treated as a central enabler of change. Participants were clear that reform cannot be delivered successfully without addressing workforce shortages, workload pressures and long-standing system constraints. Without this the trust of families will be further damaged.

Human-led digital innovation in practice

The research also found cautious optimism regarding the use of AI and digital innovation. Staff recognise the potential for technology to reduce administrative burden and improve efficiency, but remain clear that professional judgement, human relationships and child-centred practice must be at the heart of SEND delivery. Respondents called for greater consistency, guidance and opportunities to share learning as adoption develops.

Key recommendations

The findings of The Big SEND Conversation highlight the need for workforce reform to sit alongside system reform. To support a sustainable SEND workforce and successful implementation of national SEND reforms, the report recommends action at both regional and national levels.

Regional recommendations

- **Develop a London SEND Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategy** that builds on local workforce plans and brings together local authorities, education, health and wider partners around a shared approach to workforce supply, retention, mobility and attraction to SEND careers. This should reduce competition between organisations whilst strengthening collective recruitment efforts across London.
- **Undertake a Pan-London EHCP Coordinator and SEND Case Worker role review** and benchmarking exercise to better understand workforce pressures, caseloads, role design, pay, progression pathways, skills requirements and workforce sustainability. The review should identify areas of best practice and opportunities for greater consistency across London.
- **Establish a coordinated programme of workforce-centred practice sharing and learning to strengthen recruitment, retention, workforce development and reform readiness.** This should create opportunities to share effective practice in areas including workforce wellbeing, supervision, induction, career development, leadership, legal literacy, relational practice, multi-agency working, AI and digital innovation, and wider workforce innovation.



National recommendations

- **Government should develop and fund a National SEND Workforce Recruitment Campaign** to raise awareness of the breadth and value of SEND careers, strengthen workforce supply and support regional and local workforce activity.
- **Government should introduce National SEND pathways and fast-track routes**, including apprenticeships, conversion programmes, bursaries, return-to-practice schemes and grow-your-own initiatives to address workforce shortages and strengthen future talent pipelines.
- **Government should establish a National SEND workforce census to provide, for the first time, a comprehensive understanding** of the size, composition, diversity, vacancy rates, attrition trends, caseloads and future workforce needs across the SEND system. Without a robust workforce evidence base, effective workforce planning, investment and evaluation of reform impact will remain significantly constrained.



Introduction

Background to research

Across the UK, SEND services are facing increasing demand and rising complexity. The government has recognised the need for significant reform through the introduction of the SEND Reforms and Schools White Paper published in late February 2026.

This research, which has included a survey and a series of focus groups, has been carried out *with, not to* the workforce. By listening directly to practitioners and partners across all settings, we have been able to build a clearer picture of what is working well, where key challenges lie, and what support is needed to help services implement change and build a sufficient, stable and sustainable multi-agency SEND workforce.

Purpose of hearing from the workforce

The purpose of the Big SEND Conversation 2025/26 has been to better understand the experiences, perspectives and demographics of the workforce across the SEND system in London by capturing their voice. This has included exploration of key themes including; workforce conditions and workload pressures, pay and career pathways, system complexity and multi-agency working, recruitment and retention challenges, use of AI digital innovation in practice and reform readiness.

This is particularly important at a time when the sector is at a crossroads with significant national reforms that depend upon the capacity and skills of the workforce to implement changes safely and successfully.

Contributions were invited from everyone involved in delivering or supporting children's SEND services, including but not limited to local authority teams, education settings (schools, colleges, early years), health organisations, partner agencies and commissioned services. Input was welcomed from permanent staff, agency workers, and independent practitioners. Because roles and responsibilities vary, some questions were tailored to particular groups to ensure relevance.

Representative response rate

Through the three-month long research period (conducted between December 2025 and March 2026) the survey heard from a total of 557 members of the SEND workforce and ~40 participations in focus groups representing London local authorities (76%), multi-agency partners including schools'/education settings (16%) and health organisations (8%). A small number of providers participated, particularly in focus groups. A further 40 colleagues participated in a series of focus groups that allowed in depth discussions on key themes. A wide range of disciplines and levels of seniority are represented in responses from across the system.

Although it is not possible to confirm exactly what proportion of the London SEND workforce this represents (due to limited regional and national workforce census data), anecdotally we believe this to be a representative research sample.



The context in which this research took place

The Big SEND Conversation research took place against a backdrop of significant and sustained pressure and rising demand across what has been described as a ‘broken’ SEND system during a long period of anticipated national SEND reforms, ultimately announced by the government in late February 2026.

This research captures the lived experience of the workforce delivering SEND services across education, health, social care and partner organisations at the threshold of national reform.



Who we heard from

Demographics of the London SEND workforce

This research presents, for the first time, a regional baseline of workforce demographics across London's SEND system, drawing on the 557 completed survey responses. The data provides an initial but important overview of who makes up the SEND workforce across local authorities, education settings, health organisations and partner providers, and offers insights into representation, experience, and role distribution.

557 workforce survey responses

~40 focus group participants

85% female workforce

26% Black and Global Majority workforce representation

57% have worked in SEND for more than 10 years

54% have lived experience of SEND

34% are parents/carers of a child with SEND

Workforce composition and representation

The survey is predominantly composed of respondents working within London local authorities (76%), with smaller representation from school and education settings (16%) and health organisations (8%) who participated in both the survey and focus groups.

Demographic findings from the survey are more heavily reflective of the local authority workforce and therefore particular insights into statutory SEND and casework functions are pronounced with representation from provider partners and other sectors more limited in comparison. Overall, 92% of responses came from staff in permanent employment contracts with their organisations.

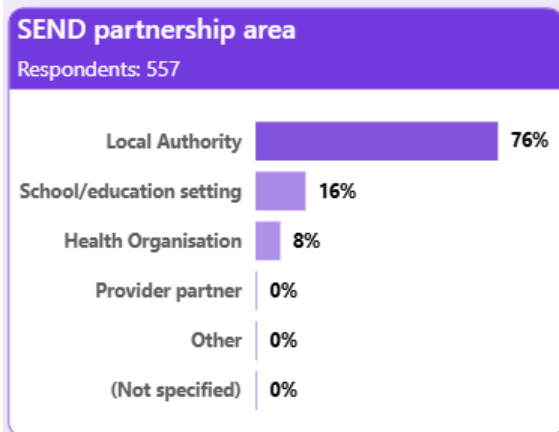


Figure 1 - Demographics of responses by partnership area



Responses were received from across most local authorities. While coverage is pan-London, some boroughs are more strongly represented than others, which should be considered when interpreting findings at a regional level.

Gender profile

The workforce is overwhelmingly female (85%), with 12% male and 3% preferring not to say. This highlights a highly gendered workforce, consistent with broader trends in social care, education and care professions.

Ethnicity profile

The workforce includes a meaningful proportion of ethnic diversity though remains majority white. 26% of respondents identify as Black and Global Majority including Black/Black British (10%), Asian/Asian British (9%), and mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds (7%). 70% of respondents identify as white, with a small percentage preferring not to say. The data provides a starting point for understanding how representative the SEND workforce is of London's diverse population.

Notably, survey responses from those who identified as being in leadership roles also broadly aligned with ethnicity demographics; 23% of respondents in leadership roles identify as Black and Global Majority and 76% identify as white.

Age profile

The SEND workforce appears to be experienced and concentrated in mid- to later-career stages. Younger respondents are less represented within the research, with 18% aged 25–34 and just 1% aged 18–24.

This indicates a workforce skewed towards older age groups, with more limited early-career representation within the research. This profile may have

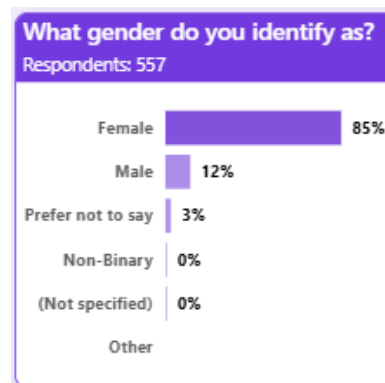


Figure 3 - Demographics of responses gender

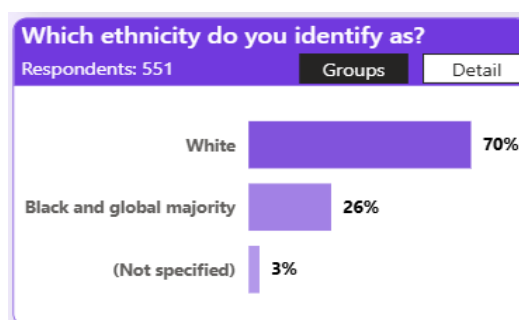


Figure 2 - Demographics of responses by ethnicity

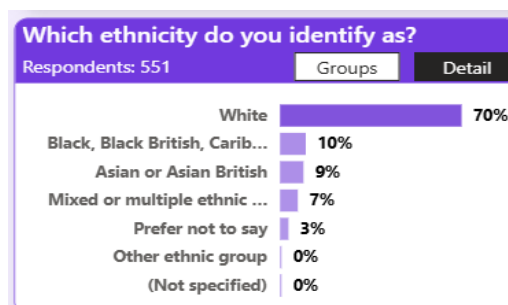


Figure 5 - Breakdown of ethnic identities

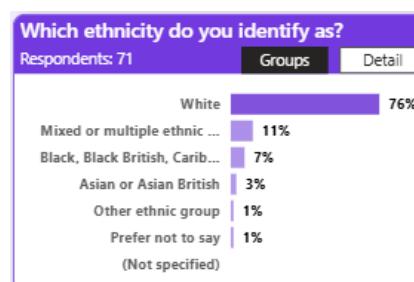


Figure 6 - Breakdown of ethnic identities of leadership roles

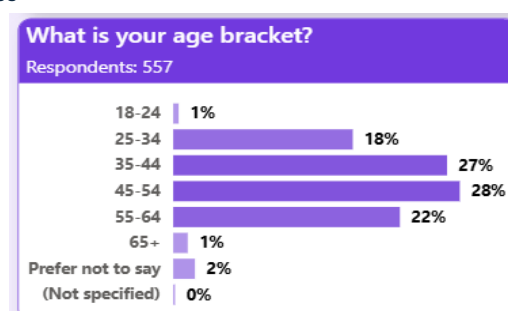


Figure 7 - Demographics of responses by age



implications for future workforce sustainability, recruitment and succession planning. It may also be a helpful observation to consider in developing diverse candidate attraction strategies.

Length of experience

The length of experience amongst respondents is mixed though notably 57% of respondents reported tenures of more than 10 years (30%) or more than 20 years (27%). Those with less than 2 years' experience made up 8% of all responses.

This suggests an experienced and committed workforce despite known and complex pressures across the system.

Lived experience of SEND

A particularly notable feature of the workforce demographics is the prevalence of lived experience with more than 54% reporting having lived experience of SEND and 34% reporting lived experience specifically as a parent or carer.

This highlights the extent to which members of the workforce bring personal experience of SEND into their professional roles. This is a distinctive characteristic of the workforce and may shape both motivation and approach to service delivery, contributing to strong empathy and understanding of family perspectives. This finding can also be considered as part of developing effective recruitment and candidate attraction strategies.

Job roles and levels

The research data reflects a broad spread of roles across the SEND system. The responses received indicate a strong response from operational and frontline members of the workforce, alongside a substantial proportion in leadership and management roles.

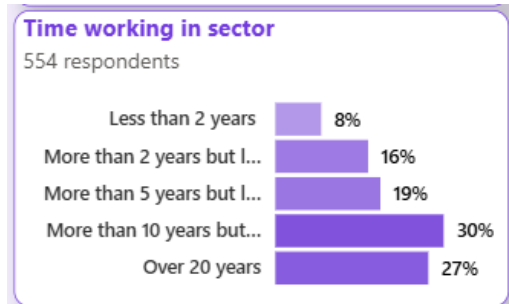


Figure 8 - Demographics of responses by tenure

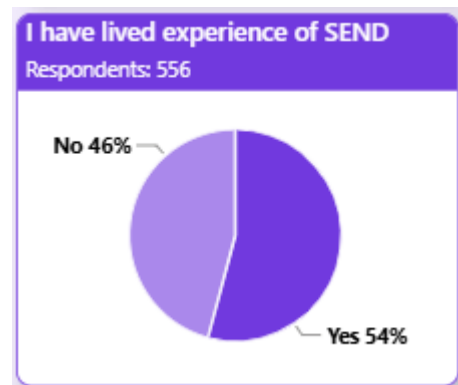


Figure 9 - Demographics of responses with lived experience of SEND

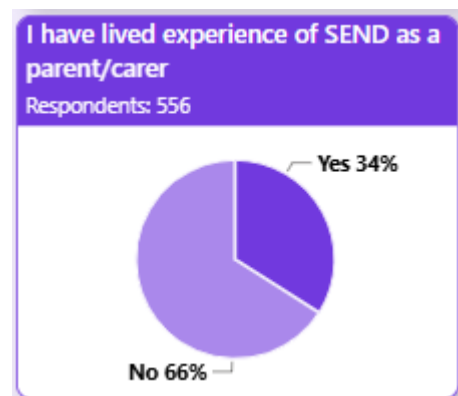


Figure 10 - Demographics of responses with lived experience of SEND as parent/carers

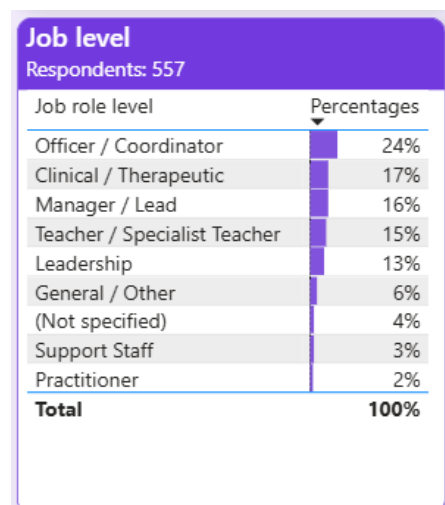


Figure 11 - Demographics of responses by job level

The diversity of job roles and specialisms represented in the survey and across the workforce reflects the multi-agency and multi-discipline nature of the SEND system.

Working arrangements

A majority (86%) reported their contract type as permanent employment, with an even share of other contract types mostly evenly split (3-4%) across fixed term contracts, recruitment agency representation, independent representation or being a student.

A majority of respondents (82%) reported working full time, with 17% confirming part time working arrangements. Of those in full-time roles, 2 days per week were most commonly reported (29%) as working from home days. Of those in part-time roles 68% reported working 1-2 days a week from home

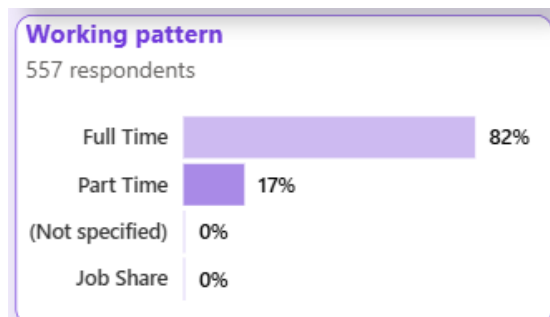


Figure 14 - Demographics of responses by working pattern

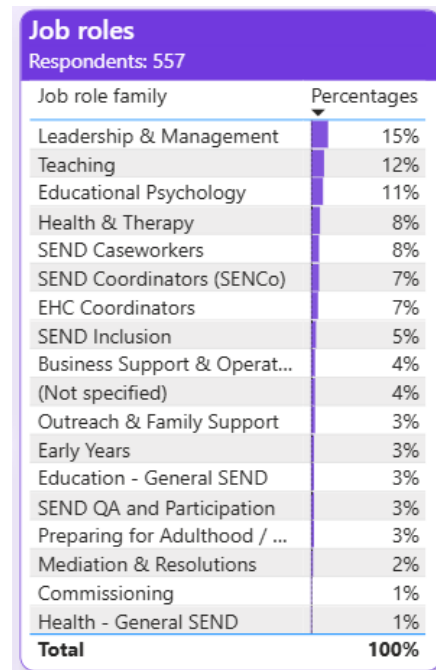


Figure 12 - Demographics of responses by job role

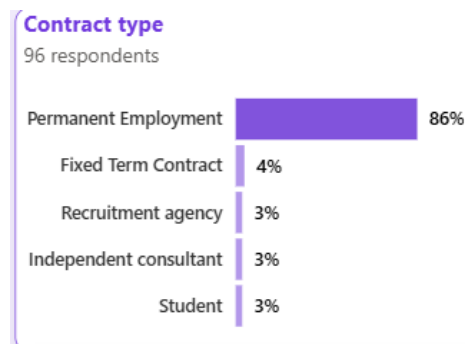


Figure 13 - Demographics of responses by contract type

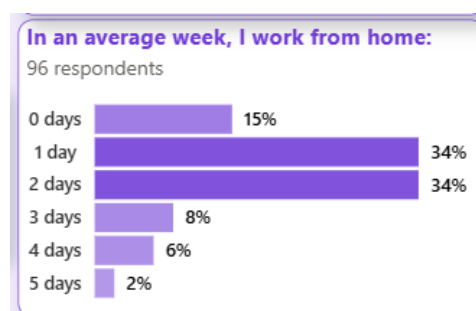


Figure 15 - Breakdown of work from home patterns

What we heard

Workload and sustainability

Caseload levels

A dominant message is that workloads and caseloads are unmanageable with only 41% of responses 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that their workload was manageable. A concerning 37.8% actively disagree that their workload is manageable.



There is strong agreement that current workloads hinder relational practice and negatively affect staff wellbeing, recruitment, retention and service quality. A clear finding from the research is that workload pressures are driven less by individual performance or resilience and more by structural features of the SEND system. The pressure on staff is not simply due to 'excessive' caseloads and rising demand but rather driven by the increasing complexity of cases, system constraints, workforce gaps, fragmented or unclear multi-agency roles and responsibilities and rising demand, resulting in a system that is widely experienced as reactive, inconsistent and 'relentless'. Staff repeatedly highlighted that caseload numbers alone fail to capture workload reality. Responses also consistently described workload as continuous rather than cyclical, intensifying over time and lacking realistic recovery periods. Case Workers described **"managing 150–200 cases depending on the LA"** in comparison to significantly lower thresholds in adjacent professions, such as social work, illustrating the scale at which complexity is being managed.

These pressures disproportionately affect roles central to statutory delivery. In particular, **66% of SEND Coordinators, 48% of SEND Case Workers and 48% of EHC Coordinators actively disputed that their workload was manageable.** Those in managerial or leadership roles were also less likely to actively 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that their workload was manageable.

"My workload is manageable, but only if I don't look at the waiting list and just accept I can only do my best within reasonable working hours." (Therapist)

"Case Workers have to deal with the fallout". (SEND Case Worker)

"Our team have improved many things for the team...but EHCP requests are increasing and young peoples' needs are becoming more complex. More staff are needed for the team to manage cases effectively." (Senior SEND Assessment & Review Officer)



Hidden workload

There is strong reference to the significant **“hidden workload”** that materially increases pressure. Case Workers described expanding responsibilities, including commissioning therapies, managing finance, coordinating travel and overseeing personal budgets. In practice, the wide range of skills required was presented as overwhelming to many with ECH Coordinators in focus groups expressing that **“we should not be doing all of this”**. Inconsistency of the ECH Coordinator role was also highlighted with some noting finance and commissioning responsibilities where others.

The research suggests this is not an isolated experience of individual role drift, but a structural shift in SEND casework with a strong perception from responses that role boundaries have expanded beyond what is reasonable or sustainable. This expansion is frequently driven by gaps elsewhere in the system, which are absorbed into already pressured roles. Not only is this increasing volume but broadening responsibilities that are less defined and more difficult to contain within existing professional boundaries.

“We are expected to know everything. I am doing things I have never done before like commissioning therapies, finance, travel, personal budgets. The breadth and pressure of the role is catalysing leavers.” (Case Worker)

Focus group discussions also highlighted inconsistency in role ownership within teams, particularly in relation to EHCP processes, with uncertainty around who is responsible for specific elements of work. This lack of clarity contributes to duplication, inefficiency and further expansion of responsibilities within already stretched roles.

“We should never be making referrals because we don’t even know the young person, we only know what’s on the piece of paper.” (Case Worker)

A significant concern raised across focus groups, particularly by Case Workers, is that statutory expectations are not aligned with operational reality, and in some cases are experienced as fundamentally unachievable at scale. While the 20-week pathway was seen as potentially achievable with adequate system wide resource, in reality the timelines were described as incompatible with the volume of cases and school capacity. Importantly, this is not framed as a failure of workforce performance, but as a structural misalignment between policy design and system capacity.

Reponses highlighted particular pressure points around transfers, annual reviews and statutory assessment processes. These requirements do not occur in isolation but interact with school calendars, consultation timelines and availability of placements and specialist input. During peak periods in the academic year, statutory processes become compressed into timeframes widely described as **“operationally impossible”** at scale.

“The ‘pinch point’ is all of the time; there is no room to breathe.” (SEND Case Worker)

“The core work is getting squeezed by statutory demand.” (Educational Psychologist)



Local support and infrastructure

Locally, responses described considerable variation in staffing levels, role scope, supervision arrangements, administrative support, availability of specialist services and local provision; some Case Workers reported access to dedicated placement or administrative teams, while others undertook these functions themselves. Educational Psychologists focus groups also highlighted how workload has evolved over time due to reductions in wider system capacity with colleagues noting that ***“we’re doing huge amounts of stuff that has nothing to do with psychology”***.

Responses described a loss of administrative and support infrastructure, resulting in them undertaking tasks previously carried out by dedicated staff. They described spending increasing amounts of time on case administration, report preparation and tribunal-related activity, reducing capacity for assessments, intervention and preventative work. This not only affects efficiency but appears to also undermine professional satisfaction and retention, and reinforces perceptions that workload is being driven by structural issues rather than solely by demand. As one case holder expressed ***“in my whole career things have never been this bad. The stress and workload is barely manageable and families are at the brunt of that.”***

The variation in experience at a local level was frequently described as a ***“postcode lottery,”*** with therapists extending this observation to broader structural inequalities, noting that ***“disparity of wealth...plays out as inequity of services, and the most vulnerable often lose out.”***

System scarcity and rising demand

A major driver of workload pressure is system scarcity exacerbated by rising demand, which is contributing to case complexity including prolonged placement searches. This system scarcity is highlighted across multiple areas; shortages in specialist provision, increasing tribunal and mediation activity and multi-agency coordination requirements alongside rising levels of need, particularly shortages in specialist school placements, limited Educational Psychologist and therapist capacity, and delays in securing multi-agency input. As a result, tasks that might otherwise be routine become prolonged and complex, requiring repeated consultations, extended negotiations and ongoing case management.

Therapists highlighted the time implications of this complexity, with one noting that ***“just finding the right people takes half a day even before you start the assessment.”*** Therapists similarly reflected the systemic nature of pressure, describing how services are often ***“just passing the problem on”*** in the absence of sufficient capacity elsewhere.

“There is no one to work with.” (Therapist)

Educational Psychologists also noted differences in workload allocation models and protected Continuous Professional Development (CPD), while therapists identified variation in commissioning arrangements, eligibility criteria and school capacity across boroughs. This contributes to significant inequalities in staff experience and service delivery across London. The system is not only busy, but structurally unable to stabilise, with limited capacity to absorb fluctuation or recover from peak demand.



While statutory elements may be achievable in isolation, they rely on sufficient capacity across the workforce and wider system. Where this capacity is lacking, a persistent gap emerges between what is required and what can realistically be delivered.

"There is a mass shortage of specialist placements nationwide and every SEN Team is feeling this." (SEN Manager)

"We need more local provision and reduced reliance on expensive independent placements." (SEND Commissioner)

Therapists also highlighted the extent to which services are managing demand through rationing rather than increased capacity with focus group participants sharing that ***"services are delivering a reduced offer compared with previous years"*** and noted ***"uncovered cases/waiting lists that are effectively deprioritised"***. Responses described narrowing eligibility criteria, limiting referrals and reducing intervention offers to maintain manageable workloads. In this context therapists particularly expressed the moral versus clinical tension that results in ***"difficult decisions being made about who will be seen and what will not be delivered"***. While attempting to offer short-term stability and manageability for the workforce, leaving needs unmet often creates longer-term pressure elsewhere in the system. As a result, workload measures do not fully respond to underlying demand.

Reactive system

A cross-cutting theme across all the research is that workload pressures limit the system's ability to operate preventatively, resulting in a reactive model that drives further demand over time. Responses described the long-term consequences of being unable to invest time early; ***"invest to save... if you invest time in families early on, it saves time in the long run"***.

Educational Psychologists reinforced this, noting that preventative, project-based and systemic work is increasingly displaced by statutory demand. This creates a repetitive cycle in which early intervention is sacrificed, leading to more complex and resource-intensive cases later.

The system appears structurally oriented towards crisis management rather than prevention, with direct implications in outcomes for children and workforce sustainability.

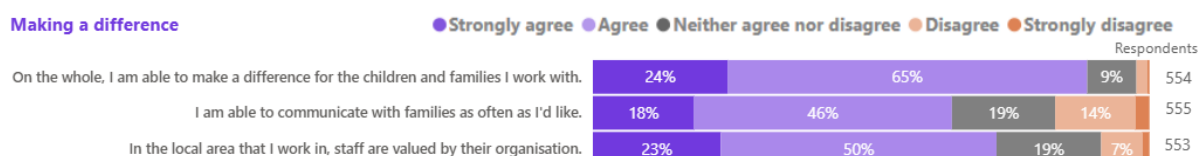
Wellbeing and retention

Making a difference

Throughout this research we hear much about the pressure and overwhelm of the system and its impact on our SEND workforce across all settings. Though in this context it's encouraging to see that the majority of the workforce (89%) either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that on the whole they are able to make a difference for the children and families they work with. Still in majority agreement, but less so, 64% of respondents also 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that they are able to communicate with families as often as they'd like, whereas ~16% actively disagreed with this statement. Overall, 73% of staff also report feeling valued by their organisation, with ~8% disagreeing.



Making a difference



Comparative to the total response, those who identified their role as ‘SEND Case Worker’ were the least likely group to agree that they feel able to make a difference to children and families (73%), able to communicate with families often (57%) or that they were valued by their organisation (56%). Although still majority positive, there is a recurring theme through several areas of the research that suggests those in officer and coordinator posts with case holding responsibilities have a disproportionate experience to the wider workforce. Nonetheless examples of pride and achievement were evident with one focus group participant describing substantial improvements;

“Locally we’ve gone from 26% to 86% compliance, which is an incredible place to be.” (Case Worker)

“As a therapist, my primary driver for the work I do is to feel like I’m making a difference.” (Speech & Language Therapist)

Feeling valued and professional recognition

Feeling valued and professionally recognised emerged as closely related themes and central to morale and retention coupled with a call for organisations to be “explicit about diversity and being anti-racist”. Respondents described SEND roles as increasingly complex and demanding, yet often insufficiently recognised within wider organisational and system structures.

Morale was stronger where staff felt their expertise was respected, their achievements acknowledged and opportunities for professional development were available. Conversely, many described carrying significant responsibility for outcomes influenced by wider system constraints over which they had limited control, contributing to frustration and a sense of professional invisibility.

Whilst wellbeing, morale and retention are under pressure the picture is not uniformly negative. Respondents remain devoted to children, families and inclusive practice, describing SEND work as meaningful, rewarding and central to their professional identity. This creates a sustained tension between strong intrinsic motivation and increasingly challenging working conditions. One Case Worker reflected that SEND work is **“a great privilege,”** while another noted that the role enables staff to **“learn so much and gain so many transferable skills.”**

Work life balance

A little over half (59%) feel that their job supports a healthy work life balance. Qualitative evidence linked to this feedback indicates a connection between flexibility in working arrangements (such as remote working or flexible hours) which contributes to enabling a better work life balance, with acknowledgements that the high emotional and cognitive load beyond working hours is not easily muted.

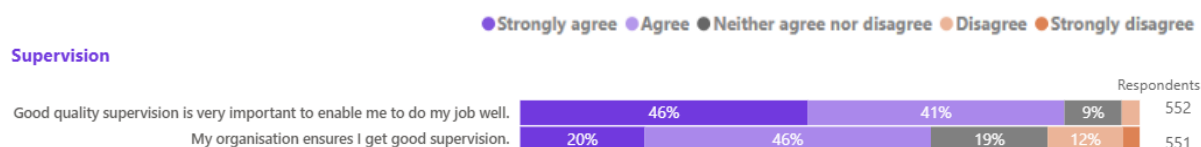




ECH Coordinators, SEND Coordinators, business support staff and those working in early years are all groups who were 50% less likely to report that their job supported a healthy work life balance. Similarly, those in managerial or leadership roles were the least likely to report that their job supported a healthy work life balance.

As referenced in the previous section, the support and infrastructure available locally varies and evidence suggests that wellbeing is shaped not only by workload, but also by access to effective organisational support. Structured supervision, reflective practice, peer support and accessible leadership were consistently identified as important protective factors. Where these arrangements were in place, staff reported greater resilience, stronger morale and increased intention to remain in their roles.

However, access to such support was inconsistent and often dependent on local capacity rather than embedded practice. Overall, 87% of respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that good quality supervision is important to them being able to do their job. Comparatively 66% felt that their organisation ensure that good supervision is provided, with ~15% actively disagreeing.



Remote and hybrid working arrangements were also reported to have mixed effects, providing flexibility though also sometimes increasing feelings of isolation and making it harder to separate work from home life.

Emotional and psychological impact

Alongside the operational impact of workload pressure, there is also a human one. Respondents frequently reported experiencing ethical and emotional strain, arising not from their work with children and families, but from being unable to secure the support they know is needed. Many also described difficulty disconnecting from work outside normal hours, highlighting the psychological impact of the role. Evidence highlights a significant emotional and psychological dimension to those within the SEND workforce, which may be exacerbated by the high proportion of the workforce with lived experience of SEND including as parent/carers.

Case Workers described experiences of sustained exposure to conflict and distress, which is exacerbated by lack of alignment between different parts of the system, with one describing their roles as being "the public's punching bag" and "if you don't have the support, you go to bed with it." Educational Psychologists also highlighted the impact of this tension, noting that "the core work is getting squeezed by statutory demand," reflecting a broader concern that professional roles are increasingly shaped by system pressures rather than practice priorities.

Promisingly, 80% of local authority employed staff across all disciplines 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their employer provides a psychologically safe environment. Those who



identified their role to be a teacher or specialist teacher reported feeling the least psychologically safe comparatively (71%).

Does your employer provide a psychologically safe environment?

(Local authority SEND)



These experiences reflect the relational nature of SEND work when combined with the challenges of operating in a constrained system. Practitioners are frequently required to manage situations where needs cannot be met within existing provision, contributing to emotional strain and ethical pressure. This has direct implications for wellbeing, retention and long-term workforce sustainability, particularly in the context of sustained system pressure.

“It’s the hostility that we all struggle with the most – I wish strong messaging would come out at an LA level to manage the hostility [we] receive from professionals, education settings and even MPs. I think it’s unrealistic to expect a practitioner or even a manager to contend with either a trained legal professional or an ‘advocate’.” (EHP Coordinator)

"While the culture in the local authority is positive this is not always the same for partner organisations and contracted providers where we sometimes see a culture that is blame focused and risk averse - this can mean things remain stuck and there is a lack of innovation in services and how we support our families. Having a more positive and supportive culture for partner organisations would likely attract a more stable workforce too." (SEND Commissioner)

SEND reforms anxiety

Responses also reported a **“surge in referrals”** linked to parental concerns about potential changes to EHCP entitlements in the lead up to the national SEND reforms, creating heightened anxiety. Focus groups characterised this uncertainty as a form of demand shock within the system. In addition to increased referral volumes, practitioners have been required to manage reassurance, explanation and de-escalation for families navigating uncertainty, described as the workforce being **“front-facing in taking on this community anxiety”**. This work sits outside formal statutory processes yet is essential to maintaining stability within services.

Reform uncertainty and anxiety have not only amplified volume but also the emotional intensity of work within a system that is already operating at or beyond capacity. Time pressures are intensified by the interaction between statutory deadlines, consultation windows and the school calendar/holidays.



Recruitment and retention

Retention was consistently linked to workforce wellbeing and organisational conditions. Responses emphasised that vacancies, turnover and reliance on temporary staff increase pressure on remaining teams, creating a cycle in which workforce instability exacerbates workload and emotional strain further. One Case Worker noted **that “retention makes a huge difference to how manageable the work feels,”** highlighting the relationship between workforce stability and workload experience.

Retention challenges were not necessarily attributed to a lack of commitment. Rather, many practitioners questioned whether existing conditions were sustainable over the long term, despite a strong desire to remain in SEND roles.

Reasons that staff chose their current organisations were heavily weighted on the specific roles or job (58%), the location (31%) and the flexible working hours available (27%). Comparatively the top reasons staff highlighted as possibly contributing to leaving included high caseloads and workload (50%), better pay elsewhere (35%), their own personal circumstances (31%) and poor supervision or management (29%).

Those in EHC and SEND case holding roles cited high caseload and workload as the primary reason that would lead to them leaving (74%). Looking more closely at location when looking for a new role; the majority (58%) of the workforce are prepared to travel between 30 to 60 minutes each way on a day-to-day basis. This broadly mirrors the responses to how long staff travel to their current work on a typical day.

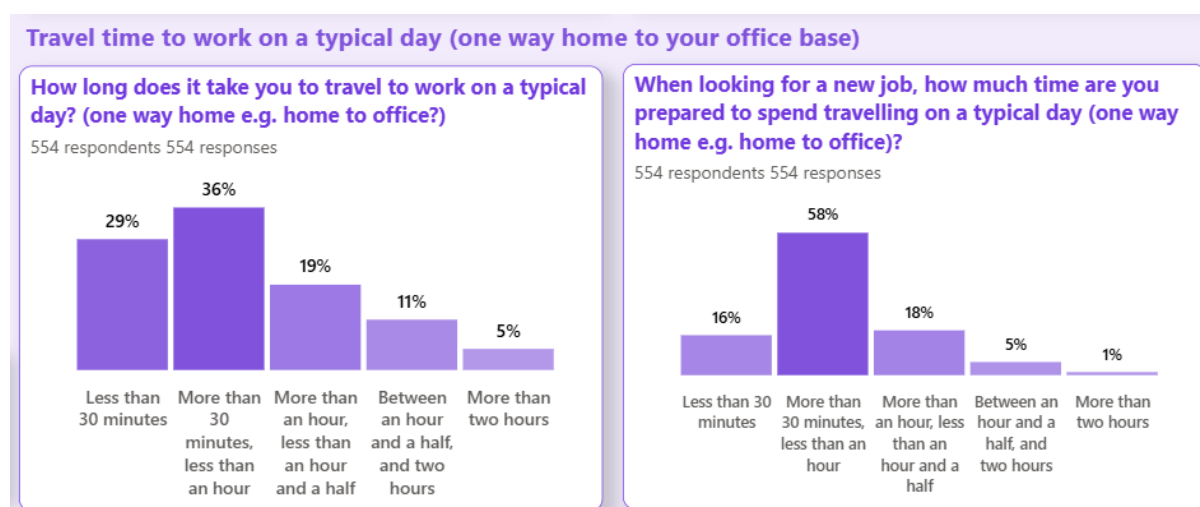


Figure 16 - Breakdown of workforce travel time and preferences

Almost half (49%) of respondents reported having been approached by a recruitment agency, though an encouragingly low amount (1%) reported plans to work for one. As referenced earlier in this report, a link is made by the majority about flexibility and work/life balance. Respondents expressed interest in their current organisations exploring more flexible contract types with career breaks and sabbaticals (49%), internal secondments (39%) and more part-time working contacts (31%).

“As a SENCo there is a huge amount of paperwork which rarely gets done in school time due to the demands of daily life in schools. Working from home one day a week would mean less admin in my evenings and weekends.”
(SEnCo)

“I am satisfied with my currently working arrangements but the ability to work flexibly, including home working, is very important. [My local authority] have a system of agile working and it would not be possible to function in this role without it ... productivity would suffer and stress would be unmanageable.”
(SEND Case Worker)

In this context several staff spoke to the fact that “child-care flexibility is valued and supported as a woman in the workforce” and many referenced an appetite for “compressed hours and term-time options”. One Head of Service (HOS) level participant commented that they have “ensured that requests for compressed hours are carefully considered and many now have compressed hours working arrangements – this supports wellbeing, work life balance, productivity, retention [and] loyalty to the organisation”. They did however acknowledge that “compressed hours are not currently approved at HOS level”.

Another participant noted that “part time and job share roles are rarely advertised which is a shame as many of the staff in SEND have caring responsibilities and this could help prevent overload if managed correctly”.

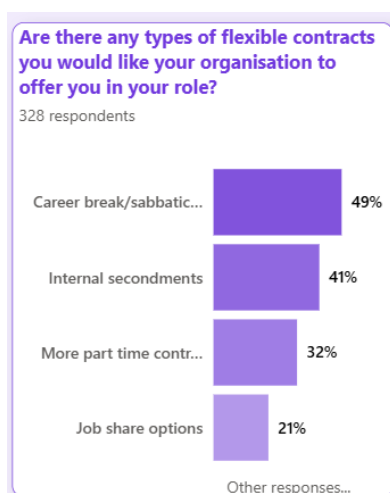


Figure 17 - Flexible contract types that staff would like organisations to offer

The research revealed that supportive leadership and positive team cultures are also important protective factors. Examples of effective practice in supporting retention included accessible management, collaborative working environments, regular supervision and recognition of achievements. These conditions were associated with staff feeling more supported, valued and able to cope with the demands of their role. Capacity issues however persist; one participant who identified being in a mediation role shared that **“my manager is amazing, supportive and very knowledgeable but I struggle to take leave as there is nobody to cover and when I have to ask for cover, I feel like I am asking for a favour”**.

“We already have a strong and supportive senior management team, and this helps with retention of staff in the SEND EHCP team.” (SEND Team Manager)

“We [can’t] expect teachers to work at weekends. When supporting families in need there is no accounting for when the ‘work’ input finishes. We don’t like to do half a job.” (Teacher)

Encouragingly there were many references to effective recruitment and retention practices from those suggesting that there is much existing good practice from which to draw on and that could be scaled.

While the SEND workforce clearly demonstrates considerable resilience and commitment, current circumstances rely heavily on this goodwill. Improving recruitment, retention and workforce sustainability requires not only support for individual staff, but systemic and organisational conditions that enable them to work effectively, feel valued and sustain their wellbeing over time.

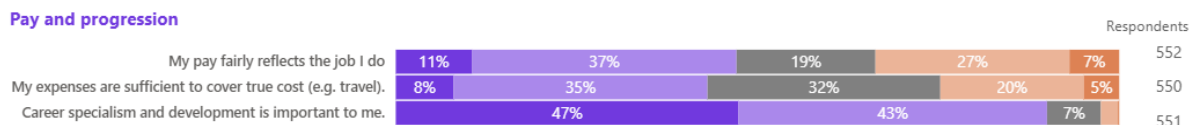
Pay, career development and pathways

Limited evolution of roles and recognition

Less than half (48%) of respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that their pay fairly reflects the role they do, with 34% actively ‘disagreeing’ or ‘strongly disagreeing’. An even lower proportion (43%) ‘agreed’ or strongly agreed that their expenses were sufficient to cover true costs, with 25% actively ‘disagreeing’ or ‘strongly disagreeing’. Those in ECH coordinator and SEND Case Worker roles were the least likely to likely to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ that their pay fairly reflects the role do with only 35% responding positively, and the same percentage (35%) actively ‘disagreeing’ or ‘strongly disagreeing’ with the statement. Those in outreach and family support roles had the lowest of all groups to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statement about whether expenses were sufficient to cover true costs (16%), with 58% actively ‘disagreeing’ or ‘strong disagreeing’.

Comparatively career specialism and development are important to everyone, with 90% ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing with the statement.

Pay and progression



Skilled, complex work that is undervalued

Concerns about pay, career development and progression link closely to issues highlighted in previous sections about sustainability, morale and professional recognition. Staff often viewed their roles as skilled, meaningful and increasingly complex, with many citing that structures, progression pathways and recognition, including pay and reward, have not evolved to reflect the growing demands of their roles.

Dissatisfaction with pay though was less about salary alone and more about a perceived imbalance between responsibility, accountability and reward. One member expressed the need for **“benchmarking against nearest neighbours to ensure wages are competitive. Our caseloads are already in line with other LAs close by, but wages are lower”**. Responses described increasingly demanding roles carried out under conditions of high scrutiny, emotional pressure and statutory accountability, leading some to feel that SEND expertise is undervalued.

The increasing complexity and specialism of SEND roles was repeatedly referenced with descriptions of the breadth of responsibilities spanning the need for legal knowledge, multi-agency coordination, commissioning awareness and strategic problem-solving. Role definitions were often perceived as unclear and inconsistent from one organisation to another. One SEND Case Worker asked, **“what is the job description of a Case Worker or Coordinator?”**, while another described that they **“are expected to know everything.”** In particular, reference to ECH coordinator and SEND Case Worker roles it was repeatedly highlighted that expectations have expanded without corresponding clarity, recognition, support or training.

“Pay and working conditions are not the issue - it's the sheer workload that staff struggle with - it's relentless and the system is broken.” (Strategic SEND Lead)

Training, development and career progression

Career progression was significant theme across all groups, but while some professions such as Educational Psychologists, highlighted clearer professional pathways, other parts of the workforce, particularly SEND Case Workers and Coordinators, reported limited and inconsistent opportunities for progression. Variations between local authorities in role structures, development opportunities and leadership pathways contribute to differing workforce experiences and can make it harder to retain experienced staff. Career development is more than simply an individual aspiration but rather a central feature of the SEND workforce sustainability.

Access to training and professional development was also seen as an important signal of recognition with focus group discussions highlighting the need for a consistent training and inductions for new staff so they aren't “thrown in at the deep end.” Case Workers and EHC Coordinators highlighted that their greatest training gaps existed in managing difficult conversations and being able to de-escalate through strong customer service, phone training, relationship management and applied legal understanding, not just theory, so as to better navigate the wider SEND system including with partners. In this context they viewed possible professionalisation for their role as **“rubber-stamping existing work rather than providing robust training”**.

Across workforce groups, opportunities for training, supervision and development are associated with stronger professional identity and increased likelihood of retention with a psychologist articulating that **“CPD makes people feel valued.”**



Improving retention requires a combination of fair pay/reward, manageable workloads, supportive leadership, greater professional recognition and clearer career development and pathways. With a predominantly female workforce improved maternity leave and flexibility for carers was also highlighted. Professional autonomy also influences retention. We heard frustration when system pressures divert from specialist expertise. Services that provide opportunities for preventative work, training, project work and multi-agency collaboration reported stronger morale and retention than those dominated by statutory activity alone.

Longer-term sustainability concerns were also highlighted with one respondent's plea to "continue to prioritise staff...without staff there is no service". Therapists, for example, described a "hollowing out" of the workforce, with shortages at mid-career levels and growing reliance on newly qualified staff placing additional pressure on teams, increased supervision demands, and fading leadership and expertise pipelines over time.

System complexity and bureaucracy

Built in bureaucracy

SEND professionals emphasise that they are operating within an increasingly complex, fragmented and administratively burdensome system. Dealing with bureaucracy is not a peripheral challenge, but a core feature of their day-to-day work, consuming significant capacity without always improving outcomes for children and families. Respondents described increasing amounts of **"work about work"**, with effort focused on statutory compliance, process management and coordination rather than direct support. This burden was particularly highlighted in relation to EHCP processes, tribunals and multi-agency working, where procedural requirements have expanded over time.

Tribunals and dispute processes were continually highlighted as significant drivers of bureaucracy. Preparing cases requires considerable professional time and documentation, and responses described services adopting increasingly defensive approaches to decision-making and record keeping. While accountability was understood as important, many felt that current processes can prioritise a **"protective"** approach over service delivery and consume resources that could otherwise support children and families.

"The numbers and complexity of EHCPs has increased beyond the capacity of staff teams to deliver good quality EHCPs in a timely manner." (SEN Manager)

"[We need] less bureaucracy - fairer funding mechanisms, support for schools to be more inclusive, recognition and acknowledgement of schools that are inclusive, standardised OAP (Ordinarily Standardised Provision) and funding for SEN pupils without an EHCP." (Principal SEND Officer)

System fragmentation

Fragmentation across education, health and care services was highlighted as a major source of complexity. Respondents frequently reported unclear responsibilities, poor coordination and duplication of effort. One therapist described a child **"living in [one borough],**



schooled in [another borough] and going to the doctors in [a third borough]...there is no link up of communication on this one child."

Respondents also identified commissioning arrangements, funding routes and differing eligibility criteria as sources of complexity, particularly in cross-borough cases. Unclear accountabilities create delay, duplication and inconsistent access to support. Multiple survey responses and focus group participants noted that navigating the system often depends on families' ability to advocate effectively, with concerns raised about equity and fairness.

Information sharing limitation

Technology and information-sharing challenges were described as further compounding issues and contributing to workforce pressure. Respondents reported limited interoperability between systems, fragmented records and a reliance on manual coordination. There was strong support for integrated digital systems that would allow information to follow children across services and geographical boundaries, reducing duplication and improving continuity of support.

Across all workforce groups, responses described a mismatch between system design and effective SEND practice. Successful SEND support was described as relying on collaboration, relationships and flexibility, but systems were often characterised as fragmented, sequential and compliance driven. This creates inefficiencies, delays and frustration, while limiting opportunities for preventative and meaningful work.

However, some respondents highlighted examples of effective local practice, including clearer processes, role definitions and coordination arrangements. Experiences though, remained highly variable. It suggests that while local improvements can reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, it cannot fully address the underlying complexity of the current system. Staff called for greater integration, clearer accountability and more streamlined system design.

Early intervention and inclusion

System working against early intervention and inclusion

Throughout this research and as referenced earlier in this report, there is strong evidence that the SEND system is increasingly operating reactively rather than preventatively. In this context while early intervention and inclusive practice are widely supported and recognised as essential to improving outcomes and reducing long-term demand, responses described system pressures working against the consistent implementation of these approaches.

Families were described as increasingly feeling pressure to seek diagnoses or statutory plans in order to access support. In this context practitioners expressed little confidence that inclusion can be achieved at scale without meaningful systemic change.

"Inclusion should be based on need rather than the paperwork a family holds."
(Educational Psychologist)

This rise in statutory demands links to reflections about the reduction in capacity for preventative work. Educational Psychologists reported that training, consultation and early



intervention activities are increasingly displaced by statutory assessment demands, leaving professionals focused on responding to high-threshold cases rather than preventing escalation.

"Children should not need to deteriorate before support becomes available." (Teacher)

Respondents repeatedly emphasised the value of early support as an “invest to save” approach, warning that missed opportunities for intervention lead to more complex, resource-intensive needs later. Early intervention and inclusion were repeatedly reinforced as critical to both effective outcomes and long-term sustainability but noted a self-reinforcing cycle in which unmet need drives greater complexity, demand and cost. Breaking this cycle requires a fundamental shift from a predominantly reactive model towards one that enables earlier support, stronger inclusion and shared responsibility across the system.

"SEND support need not be forever - if treated like FSM (Free School Meals) and PP (Pupil Premium), more schools would be encouraged to cease plans. EHCPs should be for students who are struggling to access the curriculum, but we are coerced into applying for them for behavioural needs." (SENDCo)

Responses ultimately argued that restoring capacity for earlier intervention, with more relational and community-based support would improve outcomes and reduce pressure across the system. In this context they also noted that vulnerable children, including those at risk of exclusion or exploitation, may be disproportionately affected by gaps in early intervention.

"If parents don't fight for their children, then who does - what about those in care?" (Case Worker)

Pressure in mainstream education

These challenges were closely linked to pressures highlighted within mainstream education, alongside reflections that inclusion is not solely the responsibility of schools and requires a multi-agency response. Practitioners described mainstream schools as being expected to meet increasingly complex needs without sufficient resources, staffing or specialist support. When support is delayed or unavailable, needs escalate, increasing reliance on statutory processes, specialist provision and crisis intervention.

"Mainstream schools need to be appropriately funded and supported if inclusion is to be meaningful rather than aspirational." (Teacher)

SENCOs were described as “running themselves ragged” trying to meet demand, while reductions in teaching assistant capacity have limited schools’ ability to deliver targeted interventions. As one therapist noted, there is now “no one to work with” in some settings, meaning specialist services are increasingly asked to provide support that schools previously

"[We need] more support in schools to cope with the huge SEND issue that is constantly increasing despite the reduction in funding." (Deputy Head Teacher)



delivered. This creates a situation where professionals recommend interventions that schools may lack the capacity to implement.

Multi agency working and system integration

Inconsistent partnership working

There was recognition across responses that effective multi-agency partnership working is essential to effective and meaningful SEND delivery. However, it was clear that collaboration between education, health and care remains inconsistent, often creating additional workload, delays and inefficiencies that are absorbed by members of the workforce.

Unclear roles and accountability were described as further compounding challenges. Despite the principle of shared responsibility, there was frequent uncertainty about who is responsible for funding, decision-making and service delivery. In some cases, disputes over accountability were described as taking precedence over support, with a therapist observing that **“a vulnerable child has everyone arguing over who has responsibility to support him rather than actually supporting him. He is advocating for himself - children are put at risk all of the time as a result of the lack of join up.”**

SEND Case Workers and coordinators often absorb the resulting burden of this coordination, acting as intermediaries between services and resolving issues that fall between organisational boundaries.

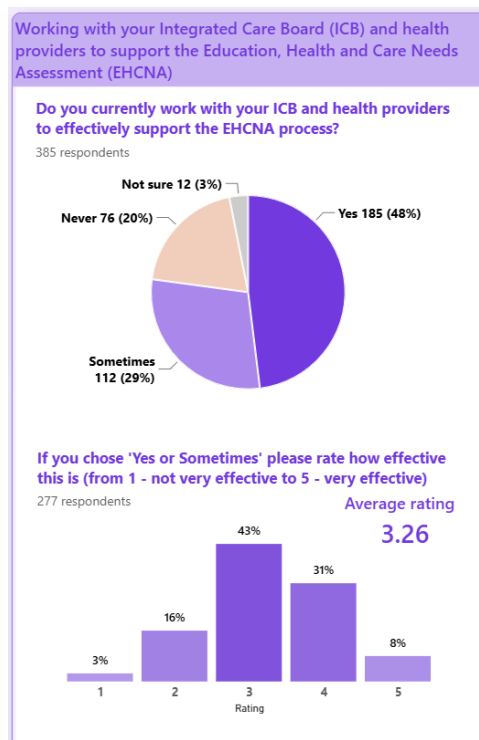
“I feel like I am just moving cases around to different people and departments but never really reaching solutions for children and families.” (SEND Case Worker)

Responses also highlighted inconsistencies in how different services contribute to SEND processes. Some professional groups, particularly Educational Psychologists, reported carrying significant responsibility within assessment and EHCP processes, while engagement from other services was perceived as less consistent. This can contribute to an uneven workload and reinforces perceptions of inequity within multi-agency partnership arrangements.

Less than half (48%) of respondents working in local authority settings answered ‘yes’ when asked if they currently work with their integrated Care Board (ICB) and health providers to support the Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) with 29% responding ‘sometimes’ and 20% responding ‘never’. Of those who did respond ‘yes’, just 39% reported this joint working as ‘effective’ or ‘very effective’ with 19% actively reporting this joint working as ‘not effective’ or ‘not very’ effective’.

Barriers relating to system complexity, explored in earlier sections of the report were highlighted as

Figure 18 - Experiences of effective working with (Integrated Care Boards) ICBs and health providers



contributing to ineffective collaboration, including; limited information-sharing, inconsistent processes and varied thresholds, differing organisational priorities, weak mechanisms for joint decision-making and resource pressures across services.

Lack of system-wide approach

Differenced in commissioning arrangements, funding responsibilities and eligibility criteria were described as adding further complexity, particularly in cross-boundary cases. Professionals spoke to spending considerable time negotiating responsibilities between organisations, which creates delays and inconsistency in support. Outcomes were sometimes seen to depend on local interpretation rather than a shared system approach.

This impact extends beyond workforce experience with respondents highlighting that fragmented working can delay support, create inconsistent provision and increase inequalities, as families with greater knowledge and advocacy skills are often better able to navigate complex systems than those with fewer resources.

As a result, successful collaboration often depends on individual relationships, professional goodwill and local leadership rather than being embedded within system design.

Overall, the feedback suggests that whilst SEND services may be coordinated, they are not systematically integrated. Multi-agency working was described as frequently relying on professionals bridging gaps between systems rather than the system being designed to work together. In practice this naturally creates inconsistencies, inefficiency, duplication and inequity. It places significant coordination demands on the staff.

"EHCPs need to be more consistent and sustainable. We do not get sufficient input from health, and what we do receive does not come through in a timely way which puts pressure on other teams so there needs to be more focus on wider responsibilities not just the local authority role. Having a statutory approach / role for SEN support plans in schools, as a pre-step to EHCPs would be a positive in managing demand and providing support at the right time." (SEND Commissioner)

Use of AI and digital innovation in practice

Enabler of reform

In the context that caseloads and workload emerged as the biggest threat to workforce sustainability, respondents generally view AI and digital innovation as a potentially important enabler of reform. The workforce is not resistant to AI and overall respondents see significant potential for AI and digital innovation to improve efficiency and reduce administrative burden.

Responses caution however that technology should augment rather than replace professional judgement, relationships and child-centred practice with one colleague reflecting



that “if AI can reduce paperwork, it gives practitioners more time for direct work with families.”

Overall, there is cautious optimism, with increasing levels of awareness and experimentation, though most (39%) report being in early exploratory stages. Almost half of respondents (48%) report that their employer has deployed the use of AI in work with children with SEND and their families, with the four tools mentioned as being deployed in local authority settings including MS Copilot (34%), Magic Notes (10%), Google Gemini (8%) and Chat GPT (2%).



Figure 19 - Stages of exploration and adoption of AI tools in practice

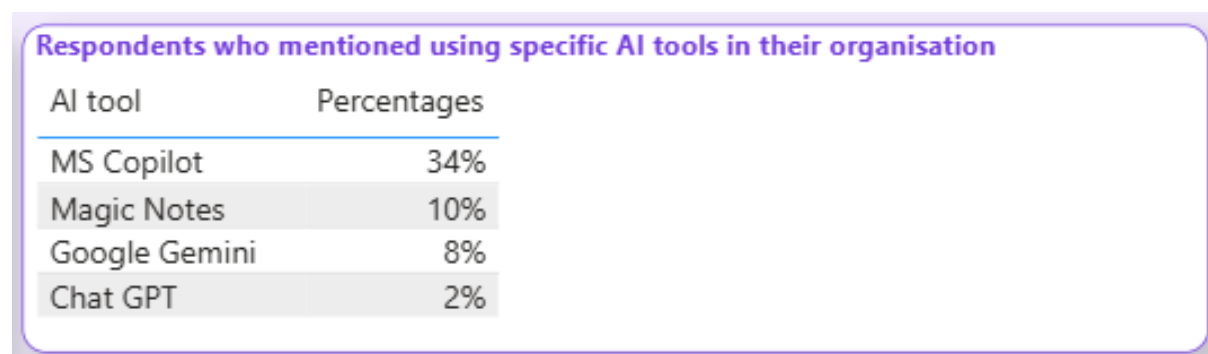


Figure 20 - Breakdown of AI tools in use across all responses

Administrative applications are broadly viewed positively by all groups, particularly by those in ECH and SEND coordinator and Case Worker roles as well as those in operational management positions.

There are however concerns around accuracy, safeguarding, confidentiality and the loss of professional nuance. Human judgement is one of the strongest themes within across responses with all professionals and sectors stressing that AI should never replace professional expertise, critical thinking, individualised assessments, direct work with families. Relationship-based

"We undertook a pilot for AI of writing EHCPs...the results were very good which would give the EHC Coordinator more time to spend collaborating with the network." (SEND Manager)



practice is repeatedly highlighted as central with one Educational Psychologist sharing that “AI can support the work, but it cannot replace the professional understanding required in SEND.”

Risk of losing personalisation and workforce skill

The SEND workforce places significant value on professional skill and personalised practice and wants assurance that technology will enhance rather than dilute this. This concern was particularly pronounced amongst practitioners who produce assessments and reports, with loss of personalisation and “independent thought” standing out as a major concern.

"AI should assist, not do the work for you." (SEND Tribunal Officer)

"AI will deskill the workforce over time - we need people who can problem solve, write documents well, and evaluate their own work rather than relying on AI tools. It will not be in the interest of families." (SEND Commissioner)

Communication is interpersonal, AI is not." (EHCP Coordinator)

Similarly, reassurance was sought reassurance on data protection and confidentiality practices, with data security and information governance cited as some of the more common risks associated with AI use. Staff wish for greater clarity and guidance before widescale adoption.

Concerns around accuracy and quality assurance were considered some of the more concerning barriers with factual inaccuracies and misinterpretations highlighted as barriers. All professional groups highlighted that AI lacks context and therefore human review is essential.

"AI makes mistakes - I have seen this happen. It should not be over-relied on. Those mistakes could impact service users." (SEN/AP Commissioning Manager)

Confidence levels

Overall responses suggest varying degrees of confidence and capability across the workforce with just over half (51%) reporting being ‘very confident’ or ‘somewhat confident’ in using digital tools and AI. Limited experience, uncertainty about governance and ethical implications were cited as some of the most common hesitations.





Figure 21 - Confidence levels in use of digital tools and AI

Many called for improved training, with particular references made to the importance of legal training, clear and consistent best practice guidance including agreed standards of use as aligned to safeguarding priorities and ethical practice.

Digital innovation alone cannot solve workforce challenges and must be implemented alongside wider action on workforce capacity, recruitment, retention and system reform.

"Efficiency gains are only valuable if outputs remain accurate, lawful and professionally sound." (Therapist)

Hopes and fears for national SEND reform

Support for national reform of the SEND system

Overall, the workforce is not resistant to national SEND reform, on the contrary there is a strong consensus that reform is both necessary and overdue. The current system is not sustainable.

However, respondents expressed concern that previous reform efforts have often increased workload pressures without resolving underlying issues. At the time of this research there was a mixture of hopeful optimism and significant anxiety about whether national reforms will address the root causes of the SEND system with calls for change to be properly resourced, workforce-led and focused on practical implementation.

Many expressed the sentiment that reform cannot succeed if it relies on the same workforce delivering more with less.

Those in strategic leadership or managerial posts also shared concerns that greater consistency could reduce the ability to respond to local context and cautioned against over-standardisation and inflexible professional discretion.



Whilst there was an overall sentiment of support for national consistency, they emphasised that it should not be at the expense of professional judgement in the local context.

A more joined up system across the SEND partnership of health, education and social care and more inclusion for SEND in mainstream education settings." (Designated Safeguarding Officer)

"We need much more emphasis on preventative work and early intervention, properly funded." (Educational Psychologist)

"A system that works to enable children to get support without parents feeling that they must fight, fight, fight!" (Senior Leader)

Workforce capacity is essential to success

There is an overarching reflection that existing workforce shortages across a wide range of skills and disciplines in the SEND system could undermine national reform ambitions. Many questioned how reform can be feasibly delivered when so many professions are experiencing significant recruitment and retention challenges.

"Understanding that while the need for our support is high, first and foremost, workloads still need to be sustainable for staff. It's tough to work in a broken system where everywhere you turn, people are spread so thin." (Educational Psychologist)

Many professional groups repeatedly highlighted concerns about implementation pressures in this context, with new requirements, more administrative work and additional training requirements. Many are concerned that reform activity would worsen burn out and have a negative impact on retention.

"Workload has got to be addressed. It is impossible to give a quality service when the workload is too high." (EHC Coordinator)

"Reformed deadlines to the EHCP and Annual Review processes that are informed by practical realistic timeframes rather than idealised ones that just lead to unrealistic expectations." (Annual Reviews & Tribunals Officer)



As described in earlier sections of this report, there is fear that staff are already operating at full capacity and that system wide change will exacerbate pressure and workload whilst also increasing expectations.

I hope that the forthcoming reforms address the very real issues that exist in the sector and that they are properly resourced and thought out. Until the sector issues are sorted, I can't see recruitment and retention drastically changing because the resources aren't there for pay and the crisis in the sector is burning good people out."
(SEND Commissioner)

Inclusion must be properly resourced

As highlighted in an earlier section of this report there is widespread support for inclusion as part of national reform, but there is concern, particularly amongst those working in education and school settings, that expectations will outpace resources with insufficient specialist resources, workforce shortages, limited funding and lack of mainstream school capacity highlighted as primary concerns.

"Mainstream schools need more support if they are to meet the needs of children with complex needs." (Educational Psychologist)

"I hope schools are challenged to be equally inclusive and welcoming and that families are confident in the local offer for their children." (Head of SEND)

Respondents strongly believe that inclusion cannot be achieved through policy expectations alone. Teachers in particular expressed the need for “big, brave, creative changes”.

"Better early intervention and funding for schools." (Teacher)

"[We need] clarity in processes for families that does not give further disadvantage to families with English as an Additional Language (EAL) [needs] or lower levels of education." (Assistant Head Teacher & SENDCo)



Success depends on trust

The importance of maintaining trust with families was cited as essential to success. The workforce expressed wanting to simplify the system for families, strengthen partnership working and improve the experiences and support for children and young people. They highlighted the importance of the national reforms noting that unsuccessful implementation would only lead to further damage and lack of confidence in the SEND system.

"Families need consistency, not constant change." (ECH Coordinator)

"More support and transparency about the system for families." (Assistant Headteacher for Inclusion)

"I want to ensure that the system is less adversarial, that we are all on the 'same side'." (Head of Service)

Workforce capacity, funding and prioritisation of implementation were underlined as primary enablers upon which the success of the SEND reforms hinge. They should not be seen as secondary considerations.



Recommendations

Regional Recommendations

These recommendations are derived from the voices and key messages identified through this research. They are also informed by regional workforce collaboration led by the Association of London Directors of Children's Services (ALDCS) over recent years, which has resulted in tangible impact at scale. Although recommendations are presented as regional it is recognised that some of the more specific activities within each may be best achieved at a sub-regional level.

1) SEND workforce recruitment and retention strategy

It is clear from this research that workforce capacity and sustainability are central to SEND reform implementation and success. The development of a pan-London SEND Workforce Recruitment and Retention Strategy should be considered. This could build on local SEND workforce plans, creating a coordinated regional approach whilst protecting local identifies and practices.

This should be developed through meaningful engagement with multi-agency partners that allows for the development of shared principles that focus on reducing competition between organisations, improving workforce mobility and strengthening attraction to the breadth of SEND careers through collaboration.

The strategy could include:

- A shared London SEND workforce vision, message and value proposition
- Shared workforce data and market intelligence that informs campaign effectiveness
- Shared recruitment campaigns and careers promotion that embeds the voice of the workforce
- Coordinated approaches to key areas of shortage and 'hard-to-fill' roles
- Joint talent pipeline development initiatives
- Workforce wellbeing and retention initiatives

Proof of concept: London local authorities have already demonstrated proof of concept in workforce collaboration over several years through the ALDCS workforce programme. Joint initiatives have included the introduction of the London Pledge for Agency Children's Social Workers (now DfE national statutory guidance), the subsequent introduction of the London Pledge for Agency Educational Psychologists, the introduction of the shared recruitment platform focused on social worker careers - London Social Work for Children and the cross-regional joint recruitment platform focused on careers in children's homes - Jobs in Children's Homes.

2) EHCP Coordinator & SEND Case Worker role reviews and benchmarking

The survey consistently identifies EHC Coordinators and Case Worker teams as experiencing some of the highest workload pressures, with caseloads and complexity routinely cited as the greatest threat to workforce sustainability.



This would help establish greater consistency in recruitment and support practical and evidence-based workforce investment.

A London-wide review could include:

- Benchmarking EHC Coordinator roles across London boroughs
- Establishing comparative data on caseloads, pay, grading, skills and qualification expectations
- Identifying areas of best practice in recruitment and workforce development
- Exploring opportunities for collaborative training and skills development

3) Programme of workforce centric practice sharing and learning

The findings from this research highlights the importance of workforce development, professional recognition, learning opportunities and career development as contributors to workforce wellbeing, retention and sustainability. Across the research, respondents highlighted significant variation in workforce practices, role design, induction, supervision, recruitment approaches, training opportunities and organisational support. At the same time, many examples of effective local innovation and good practice were identified.

A more coordinated approach to sharing learning across London would create opportunities to accelerate improvement, reduce duplication of effort and strengthen workforce capacity at a time of significant reform and system change.

A regular programme of regional practice sharing and workforce learning could build on existing activities working with key regional networks. The aim would be to create a culture of continuous learning, innovation and collaboration across London's SEND workforce.

The practice sharing and learning programme could include:

- Sharing effective recruitment and retention initiatives, including workforce wellbeing, flexible working, career pathways, induction models and approaches to professional recognition
- Developing shared learning opportunities in priority areas identified through the research to build workforce skills and confidence, including; legal literacy, relational practice, managing difficult conversations, customer service and multi-agency working
- Sharing effective approaches to workforce development, supervision, coaching and continuous professional development
- Sharing evidence and learning from AI and digital innovation pilots, including governance, ethics, safeguards, information security and productivity benefits
- Building a collective evidence base of "what works" to support workforce sustainability and successful implementation of SEND reform
- Creating opportunities for cross-sector learning between local authorities, education settings, health organisations and provider partners



National Recommendations

1) National recruitment campaign

Workforce shortages across the breadth of SEND are longstanding, systemic and national in scale. Local, and even regional, efforts alone cannot resolve the pressures without national support. A government-led national recruitment campaign is essential to complement and amplify local, sub-regional and regional activity.

A government fund and led recruitment campaign should be co-designed with regions to build on existing activities and engage multi-agency partners, to strengthen national workforce supply, visibility of SEND careers and reduced competition and unnecessary independent sector intrusion.

This should:

- Provide clear national leadership, unity and consistency of message about the value of SEND careers
- Promote SEND careers as a rewarding and specialist professional pathway
- Raise awareness of the breadth and diversity of SEND careers, particularly those experiencing acute shortages
- Complement local and regional workforce activities, providing flexibility to tailor to need

2) National SEND pathways and fast-track routes

The SEND workforce is large, multidisciplinary and highly skilled, spanning education, health and social care. For many specialist roles, workforce supply takes years to train and develop, creating significant risk to successful reforms implementation.

To stabilise and grow the workforce, particularly in some of the most challenging areas of recruitment, creative and accelerated entry routes are urgently required.

These should include:

- Conversion courses into the wide range of SEND professions
- Apprenticeships and paid training pathways
- Dedicated national fast-track and "grow your own" programmes
- Return-to-practice schemes
- Bursaries and financial incentives for shortage occupations

3) Establish a national SEND workforce census

The success of SEND reform is fundamentally dependent on a sustainable, skilled and sufficient workforce. However, there is currently no comprehensive national SEND workforce census.



As a result, there is no clear national baseline for understanding. This creates a significant barrier to effective workforce planning and limits the ability of government, regions and local areas to make evidence-based decisions about workforce growth, training and reforms implementation.

This should include;

- The size and composition of the SEND workforce
- Workforce demographics and diversity
- Vacancy and turnover rates
- Attrition trends
- Caseload levels
- Distribution of specialist roles



Conclusion

Unique understanding of who makes up London's SEND workforce

The Big SEND Conversation has provided a unique insight into the demographics, motivations and experiences of people who deliver SEND services across London. It reveals a workforce that is experienced, skilled, passionate and dedicated to improving outcomes for children and young people with SEND, with many bringing their own lived experience of SEND personally and/or as a parent/carer. Despite sustained pressure and increasing complexity, staff continue to demonstrate extraordinary commitment to the children, families and communities they support.

"We do this job because we care." (ECH Coordinator)

Successful reforms implementation relies on workforce capacity

At the same time, the findings present a clear warning, one that underpins reforms implementation success. The workforce is operating within a system that many perceive to be increasingly difficult to sustain. Rising demand, growing complexity, workforce shortages, fragmented service delivery, shortages of specialist provision and significant administrative burden are all contributing to mounting pressure across the system. These challenges are particularly acute for those working in statutory functions and case-holding roles, where workload and caseload pressures are most pronounced.

Workforce pressures and system design are interlinked

Throughout the research, we have consistently heard that workforce challenges cannot be separated from wider system design. The pressures experienced by staff are not solely the result of increasing demand; they are also a consequence of the way the current system operates. Workforce sustainability, inclusion, early intervention, multi-agency integration and the operation of EHCP processes are intrinsically linked and therefore have to be considered together.

Shared hope and vision for national SEND reforms

There is, however, cause for optimism. Responses demonstrate a strong appetite for national SEND reform and shared hope for the future: a SEND system that is more inclusive, less adversarial, more preventative, better integrated and centred on relationships with children, young people and families. The workforce is not resistant to change and calls for reforms that are practical, properly resourced and grounded in the realities of frontline delivery.

Calls-to-action for leaders and government

The recommendations set out in this report recognise that workforce sustainability must sit at the heart of SEND reforms. Investment is needed not only in services and provision, but also in the people who deliver them. This includes action to strengthen recruitment, retention, workforce development, career pathways, professional recognition, wellbeing and workforce planning.



A clear message emerging from the research is that workforce sufficiency cannot be improved through isolated action alone. There is significant opportunity to strengthen collaboration across London through a coordinated workforce recruitment and retention strategy, a focused review of EHCP Coordinator and SEND Case Worker roles, and a structured programme of workforce learning, practice sharing and innovation. The survey identified many examples of effective local practice; the challenge now is creating the mechanisms to share, scale and sustain that success across the wider system.

The findings also highlight the importance of workforce intelligence. Despite the SEND workforce being central to delivery of national reforms, there remains no comprehensive national understanding of its size, composition, vacancies, turnover, caseloads or future workforce requirements. Establishing a National SEND workforce census would create the foundations for more effective workforce planning and better evaluation of reform impact over time.

Ultimately, successful SEND reform will depend upon the strength, stability and wellbeing of the workforce. The voices captured through The Big SEND Conversation provide a powerful evidence base and a clear call to action.

If acted upon, these recommendations provide an opportunity not only to strengthen the SEND workforce, but also to improve confidence in the SEND system and maximise the impact of national reforms for children, young people and families. By investing in workforce capacity, capability and collaboration, London and government can help build a SEND system that is more inclusive, effective and sustainable for generations to come.

Thank you to the many colleagues who participated in this research, both through the survey and focus groups. The wealth and richness of contributions reinforce the workforce as our greatest asset and enabler.

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