



Transforming SEND:

An alternative white paper

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Foreword

Imagine: a future where every child feels understood at school. Where every child comes into the classroom excited about their lessons, ready to learn, looking forward to playtime with their friends, getting the best start in life. Knowing that they belong.

There is a lot of work to do if we're to make this future a reality for children with speech and language challenges, but it can be done. And the Government's long-awaited Schools White Paper^Q is a once-in-a-generation chance to make it happen.

The Government's white paper is expected to cover reform of the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system, aiming to improve the support children with SEND get at school. Almost a quarter of children with SEND have speech and language challenges. There can be no meaningful SEND reform if their needs are not considered.

We're the largest charity that works exclusively to support children with speech and language challenges. That's why we have created this document, an alternative white paper designed to help the Government get this right. For families like Tiya and Rachael's,^A change is long overdue.

The Schools White Paper is a chance to do things differently – to do things better. It's time for the Government to step up and press SEND on a future where every voice is heard.

What is a white paper?

A white paper is a government policy document. It sets out plans for future laws and policies. The Schools White Paper will include proposals on SEND in England.

Rachael and Tiya's words appear throughout this paper.

Rachael is a qualified teacher and SEND mum, who runs a local support group for parents and carers of children with SEND. Both her children have speech and language challenges and struggled for a long time through the system until they could not attend mainstream school anymore. After a long, hard fight, the family has now secured them suitable education.

Tiya's son was diagnosed with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), a lifelong condition affecting almost 700,000 children in England, when he was four. To get that diagnosis, Tiya had to leave her job and find and fund private support. Her son now attends a specialist unit for children with DLD within a mainstream primary school, where he is thriving. Having seen the huge gap in need and provision first-hand, Tiya is now training to become a speech and language therapist.

Where we are

Right now, a record two million children in the UK are dealing with speech and language challenges. They want what every child wants – to go to school, to play with their friends, to belong. Yet too often, they're denied those opportunities. For some, their speech and language challenges are short-term and preventable. For others who are neurodivergent or disabled, the challenges they face will be lifelong. For every child, the right support can be transformative. So why are so many missing out? As Tiya says, *"the SEND system is failing the very children it is meant to protect."*

One big problem is that too many of the people who work with children simply haven't been given the training or the tools they need to help. Teachers, for example, often aren't trained to spot issues and offer support. This means that school can be tough for children with speech and language challenges. They can find it impossible to keep up with their lessons or make friends. Feeling misunderstood, isolated, and frustrated, their mental health can suffer. And rigid behaviour and attendance policies mean children are often punished for things that aren't their fault, like not following instructions.

Even when children's challenges are spotted, it can be difficult for families to get the right support. Rachael explains that *"knowing how [the system] works and what is out there"* is hugely challenging. And for Tiya, the battle to get help *"cost us years: my career, my mental health, family finances, and – most importantly – precious time in my son's early education."*

There simply aren't enough speech and language therapists or specialist speech and language teachers, and families can face a postcode lottery when searching for help. Specialist speech and language schools can be a lifeline, but there are none further north than our own Dawn House in Nottinghamshire. This is not good enough.

Finally, 92,000 children have education, health and care plans (EHCPs) primarily due to speech and language challenges. EHCPs are a critical part of guaranteeing that all children get an education, and these guarantees have been in place since the Thatcher Government. Children and their families need reassurance that their legal guarantees to support won't be taken away, whether EHCPs themselves continue in their current form or not.

We admit, there's a lot to be done. But we're hopeful, and we've got good reason to be. We know what changes children with speech and language challenges need. We know how to make those changes happen. And with the Schools White Paper, the Government has a real opportunity to deliver them.

Where we want to be

Every child with speech and language challenges should be able to thrive at school. That means feeling included and safe, joining in with lessons and making progress, having fun with friends at playtime, and knowing that their voices are heard.

This is possible. For the children with complex speech and language challenges who attend our two special schools, it's already happening. And our innovative tools and training help teachers and nursery staff in mainstream settings nationwide to support children's speech and language development.

Like the Government, we want every child to have the best start in life. Their strategy, announced in July 2025, rightly emphasises just how important a child's early years are for their development and growth. The Government has set an ambitious target for school readiness, too; by 2028, 75% of five-year-olds in England must achieve a 'good level of development'.

With the right approach, we can work together to unlock opportunity for millions of children nationwide, including those with speech and language challenges. To do that, Rachael explains, the Government must *"listen to children, parents and professionals"* and make sure that children feel *"seen as people, [not] just as numbers."*

When we get SEND reform right, it will be transformative for children, their families, and our society. Tiya explains what a better system would have meant for her family: *"I would have still had my career [and] not been traumatised by the process. My son would have received the right support straight away, rather than losing years of learning and confidence."*

Mental health, happiness, education, job prospects, relationships. With the right help, all these could be boosted, for children and for their families. For our society, too, the impact would be huge. Just think of the money that could be saved – and better used elsewhere – if support were provided earlier.

How we'll get there

To truly give every child the best start in life, the Government must:

- **invest in speech and language support for all pupils**, as well as for those who are struggling. Initial and ongoing training and qualifications for teachers, nursery staff, and others who work with children must include how to spot and support children – for example, by adapting lessons and ways of working and understanding how technology like augmented and alternative communication can help. Everyone should have *“the time, space and expertise to help the children”*, as Rachael explains. Attendance and behaviour policies and the national approach to behaviour and attendance must be reformed to stop unfair punishment, too. And schools and nurseries must be supported to run group programmes for all ages.
- **rethink what children learn** so that it supports the development of their speech, language and communication skills. That includes providing opportunities to focus on these skills throughout the early years foundation stage and across the national curriculum. Most learning happens through talking and words; let's prioritise these skills. They're the foundation for reading, writing, maths, science, and much more.
- **get resourced provision right** for children with speech and language challenges, helping make mainstream schools more inclusive. These units must be offered for all age groups and there must be enough that focus on speech and language challenges. We need more of these units, not fewer, staffed by specialist teachers as well as speech and language therapists, and available nationwide. It's *“unacceptable”* that Tiya's son has to travel an hour each way just to learn. Resourced provision should help children join in, not segregate them or act as a special school without the specialists. Educators need clear criteria from government on what good looks like and a national programme to help schools develop high quality new units.
- **make sure that every school has access to specialists**, including speech and language therapists and specialist teachers with extra qualifications and training. Teachers of children who are deaf or who have multi-sensory challenges take specific qualifications for those jobs. It should be the same for teachers specialising in speech and language challenges.

- **deliver enough quality special schools** for children with complex speech and language challenges across England, so that no child is deprived of an education.
- **get better value out of special schools** for pupils, families, and communities. We need a national accreditation programme for schools which operate as speech, language and communication specialists. Publicly funded ways for high quality special schools to share their practice with mainstream schools are vital, too. And while independent providers can stimulate innovation, limiting profiteering by special schools would make sure public funds can support more children. As Rachael notes, money should be spent *"in the right places, on the children."*
- **guarantee access to help** so that families do not have to fight for support. The current EHCP system is far from perfect, but children's rights must be protected by law. Families should get free advocacy during the EHCP process, rather than having to become experts by themselves. Schools, nurseries and colleges should be inclusive overall, so every child with speech and language challenges can succeed. And schools, nurseries, colleges, councils and NHS trusts should have to publish how they'll provide the right help and be held to account by Ofsted.
- **launch a National Year of Speech and Language** to provide parents, carers and professionals with information and support – and change how speech and language challenges are viewed. Families like Rachael's must not be left *"feeling alone,"* as though they're *"the only ones who go through this"*. They must be given information and support to parent differently.
- **be clear in all government statements** – in parliament, media, and elsewhere – that children who struggle with talking and understanding words face different challenges and have different needs. Current government programmes are designed for children with preventable challenges, but often government spokespeople talk about them as though they're appropriate for children with lifelong challenges like Developmental Language Disorder, too. This isn't the case, and it's worrying for young people, families, and practitioners to feel their government does not understand this. The Government must recognise the real lives and needs behind the statistics. Treasury analysis of the economic impact of the lifetime costs of not providing support would also be useful.

Our solutions are concrete and evidence based. They're achievable, too. And when acted on, they will have real, long-lasting impacts – for children, families, and society as a whole.

At Speech and Language UK, we want every child to face the future with confidence. When we reach children earlier, we can give those who struggle with talking and understanding words the skills they need thrive.

We design innovative tools and training for thousands of nursery staff and teachers. We give families the confidence and skills to help their children. We run two incredible special schools for children with complex speech and language challenges. And we put pressure on politicians to prioritise support for children when they're struggling. Together, we can make sure no child is left behind.

To find out more about our solutions, and our schools, visit **speechandlanguage.org.uk**.

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