

Key Facts

76,300

children with reported special educational needs in 2016-17

£217m

spent by the Education Authority on children with special educational needs in 2015-16

£55m

spent on classroom assistants for children in mainstream schools in 2015-16

13%

percentage increase in children with special educational needs since 2011-12

63%

percentage of children with special educational needs who are male in 2016-17

21%

percentage of statements of special educational needs issued within the 26 week statutory limit

86%

percentage of children with special educational needs leaving school with at least 5 GCSEs A*-G in 2014-15

10 years

number of years that have passed since the Department of Education began a review of special educational needs. It is still not complete.

Executive Summary

1. Special educational needs (SEN) can affect a child's ability to learn and they may require extra help to achieve their potential at school. Where the help needed by a child cannot reasonably be provided within the normal resources available to a school, the Education Authority (EA) will consider making a formal statement of SEN.
2. Just over 76,300 children have SEN (with or without a statement) and mainstream schools are finding it increasingly difficult to strike a balance that allows all children to learn at a different pace and often in a different way. The Department of Education's (the Department) Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs anticipates that only about two per cent of the school population should require a statement of SEN: in 2016-17, five per cent of children had a statement. This equates to more than 17,000 children, an increase of 21 per cent since 2011-12.
3. Annual expenditure on SEN is increasing and in 2015-16 was over £250 million. Of this, £217 million is EA expenditure. The Department told us, that given the rising numbers of children with SEN, this is a challenge for the Department, the EA and schools, in terms of increasing pressure on the education budget.

Key findings

4. The sooner a child's particular needs are identified and appropriate support put in place, the more responsive the child is likely to be. Research has found that early intervention makes a real difference to life chances and may result in lower spend in meeting that child's needs as they grow up. We found that there are variations in the methods used by schools to identify children requiring additional support.
 5. Training and development for school staff in identifying and providing for children with SEN is essential. While a wide range of training is offered, there remains a desire for further comprehensive training for all school staff, including an enhanced focus on SEN as part of initial teacher education.
 6. In 2015-16, 79 per cent of statements of SEN were completed outside the statutory time limit of 26 weeks. The EA told us that this is mostly due to valid exceptions permitted in legislation relating to delays in receiving advice from the health sector, but could not provide a detailed breakdown. Work is ongoing to reduce waiting times, but the reasons for delays must be closely monitored if improvements are to be achieved.
 7. We found inconsistencies between the figures held by the Department and the EA in relation to spend on SEN and were unable to get a complete breakdown of the costs.
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8. The costs associated with providing support for children with SEN without a statement are not ring-fenced and are primarily funded from school budgets. In addition, a range of pupil support services are funded by the EA to meet the needs of these children and young people. All children with SEN need appropriate support to enable their needs to be met effectively, however, the small sample of schools we visited highlighted the difficulties faced in managing the significant, and growing, number of children with SEN within existing resources. For some schools this may not be sustainable.
9. Whilst we recognise that measuring progress will be different for different children and not all will be related to educational outcomes, in our opinion more needs to be done to monitor and evaluate progress. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) can play a major role in monitoring and evaluating provision. As part of the individual school inspection process, the ETI evaluates the provision for children with SEN, however we found that it is around 10 years since the ETI last evaluated the overall provision for SEN in primary and post primary schools.
10. At present over 17,000 statements of SEN are reviewed each year at an annual cost of around £6 million. The EA told us that 80 per cent of statements remain unchanged. The provision of a classroom assistant (at an annual cost of £55 million) is often considered as a key form of support given to children with a statement of SEN yet their impact, or that of any other support provided, has not been evaluated at a strategic level.
11. On a more positive note, we were encouraged to find that the educational achievements of children with SEN are improving. Fewer are leaving school with no formal qualifications and more are going on to further and higher education. In addition, much good practice was evident during our visits to a small sample of schools; however, it is mostly being shared on an informal, local basis.
- Overall conclusion on value for money**
12. It is over 10 years since the Department began a review to address a range of issues including the increase in the number of children with SEN, and the inconsistencies and delays in assessment and provision. We found that the number of children with SEN and the associated costs are continuing to rise. Whilst the educational achievements of children with SEN are improving, there has been no strategic evaluation of the support provided to these children to ensure the best possible outcomes. Inconsistencies in the identification of children with SEN persist. Delay in the completion of statements remains a major issue yet only limited information could be provided as to the reasons behind these continued delays.
13. As a result of our review, we can only conclude that neither the Department

Executive Summary

nor the EA can currently demonstrate value for money in terms of economy, efficiency or effectiveness in the provision of support to children with SEN in mainstream schools. We understand that the Department intends to begin implementing a new SEN framework during the 2018-19 academic year. This must be underpinned with robust mechanisms for the strategic evaluation of interventions and outcomes; rigorous monitoring of expenditure; and continued efforts to reduce delays in issuing statements.

Recommendations

1. **We recommend that the Department and the EA should ensure that schools apply a clear and consistent approach to identifying, and providing for, children with SEN.**
2. **The Department, the EA and schools should ensure that all teachers, including those studying for their teaching qualification, receive appropriate training so they are able to identify children with SEN and take the necessary action to provide support to them.**
3. **The EA must record and monitor the reasons for all delays in issuing statements in order to take effective action to reduce waiting times.**
4. **The Department should continue to work to improve the waiting time for statutory assessments. This should include co-ordinating with the Department of Health to agree on an improved achievable timescale for receiving advice.**
5. **The EA must ensure that SEN expenditure is reported consistently and that EA expenditure on all types of support for children with SEN can be easily identified and monitored, otherwise it cannot be controlled.**
6. **The Department and the EA should review the current funding arrangements to ensure that available resources are used effectively to meet the needs of all children with SEN, with or without a statement.**
7. **We recommend that the Department gives further consideration to the level of expertise within each inspection team, to ensure that SEN provision is evaluated in mainstream schools by a specialist, particularly where there are a high proportion of children with SEN.**
8. **The Department should commission the ETI to carry out an up-to-date evaluation of SEN provision in mainstream schools which could play a key part in highlighting areas to be addressed in the development of SEN strategy and future training programmes. A particular focus in primary schools should be the use of, and effectiveness of, early intervention strategies.**

- 9. The Department and the EA must assess the quality of SEN support provided in mainstream schools by formally evaluating it in terms of the progress made by children. This will allow resources to be focused on types of support which maximise progress and improve outcomes.**
 - 10. We recommend that the Department and the EA should set up a central resource containing all up-to-date guidance relating to SEN which could also act as a discussion forum for sharing ideas and good practice examples.**
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