

# Autism and education in England 2017

**A report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism  
on how the education system in England works for  
children and young people on the autism spectrum**



# Introduction

By Cheryl Gillan MP



## AUTISM AND EDUCATION IN ENGLAND, 2017

Report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism consults regularly with autistic people and family members on their priorities for change, and education comes up consistently as an area where further attention is needed.

We are also advised by an advisory group made up of autistic adults, parents, professionals and charities who tell us that the needs of children on the autism spectrum are not well enough understood, and parents too often have to fight to get the right school place for their child. In addition, like many of my parliamentary colleagues, I hear regularly from constituents who struggle to obtain the educational provision and support their children need.

As an All Party Group, we previously worked on the Children and Families Act 2014 and supported the principles on which the reformed special educational needs system is founded. We were also successful in our work with The National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism in ensuring that from 2018 autism will be included in Initial Teacher Training courses.

However, in listening to stories from constituents as well as autistic people and family members we spoke to in our consultation, it became increasingly clear that the reforms to the special educational needs system were not having the desired effect and that while additional training in autism for new teachers was very welcome, more was needed to transform understanding across our schools.

We felt compelled to take a deeper look into why children were being let down and what needed to change. We established a sub-group to evaluate this and I would like to thank those colleagues who have carried out this important work, as well as all our witnesses and respondents to our call for evidence.

I was proud to introduce the Bill that became the Autism Act 2009, which still remains the only disability-specific legislation in England. For the first time, a national adult autism strategy, underpinned by legal duties on councils and the NHS, became a requirement, setting out how autistic adults should be supported.

As the 10 year anniversary of the Act approaches, I believe it is now time to introduce a national autism and education strategy for children and young people, setting out how they should be supported and what we should expect from our education system. Without such a strategy, too many young people will fall through the gaps and miss out on the opportunities they deserve. I urge the Government to respond positively to this report.

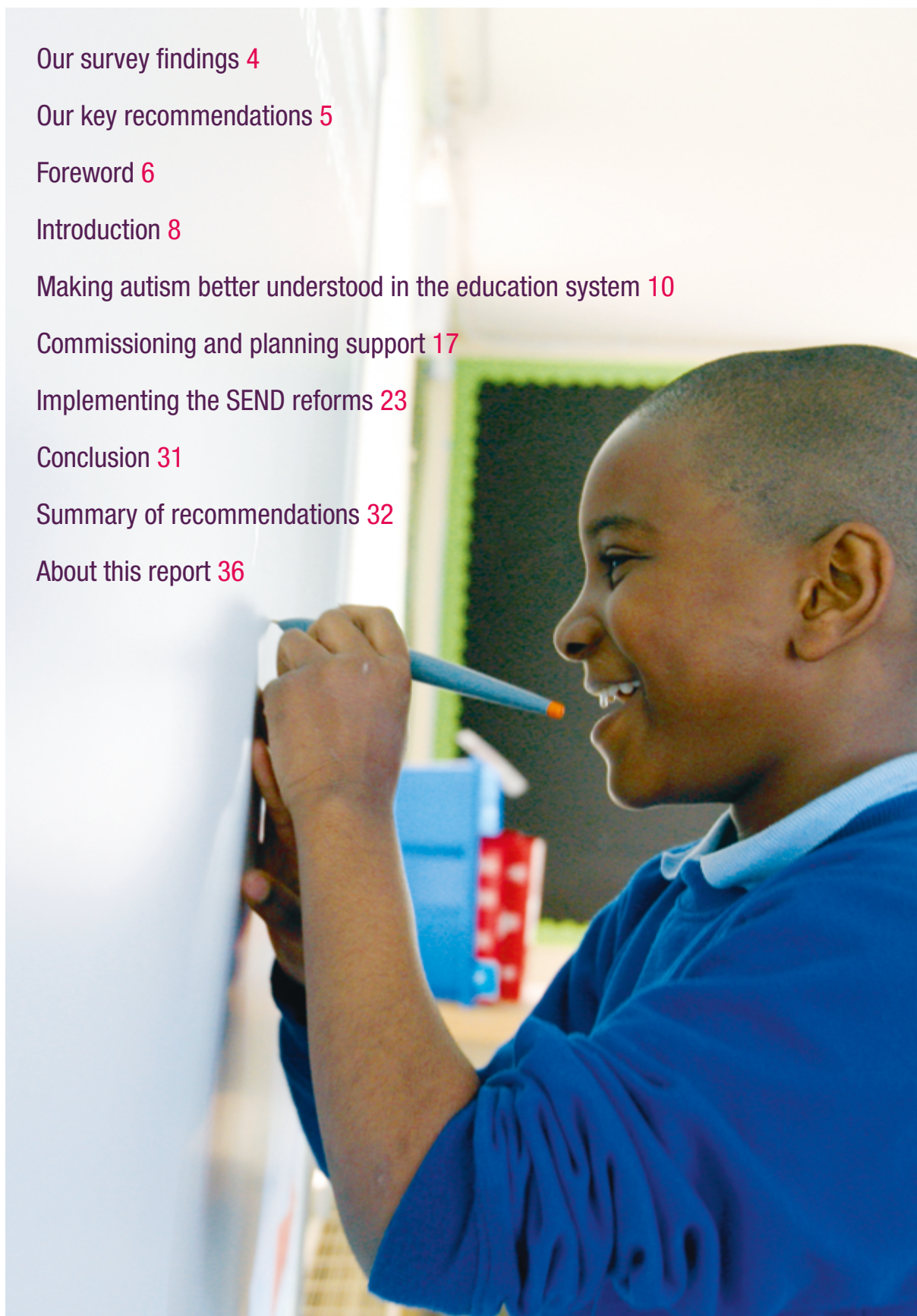


**Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP**

Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism

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# Our survey findings

## 3 years



on from the introduction of significant reforms to the special educational needs system in England,

**children on the autism spectrum are still being let down by the education system**

## Fewer than half



of children and young people on the autism spectrum say they **are happy at school**

Seven in ten say that their peers do not understand them and five in ten say that their teachers do not know how to support them

## 6 in 10 young people



and seven in ten of their parents say that **the main thing that would make school better for them is having a teacher who understands autism**

## 70% of parents

say that **support was not put in place quickly enough for their child**



Nearly 70% waited more than six months for support and 50% waited more than a year

## 42% of parents



say their child was **refused an assessment of their special educational needs the first time it was requested**

## 40% of parents

say that **their child's school place does not fully meet their needs**



## Only 1 in 10 parents

say they are **very satisfied with the process of agreeing an education, health and care (EHC) plan for their child**



## Fewer than 5 in 10 teachers

say that they are **confident about supporting a child on the autism spectrum**

With thanks to Axcis Education for their support of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism's education inquiry.

# Our key recommendations

- The Government should develop a national autism and education strategy by the end of 2019 that includes:
  - training for school staff
  - reasonable adjustments for pupils on the autism spectrum in schools
  - provision of a specialist curriculum for all pupils who need one
  - measures to reduce bullying and promote inclusion
  - and guidance for local authorities on commissioning the full range of educational provision and support.
- Autism understanding should be embedded in the education system, with autism training for all teachers, including head teachers, and ongoing funding for the Autism Education Trust.
- Local authorities should collect data on the number of children and young people in their area who are on the autism spectrum, and on the profile of their needs, and use this data to plan and commission the school places and other services they will need.
- There should be a presumption by local authorities that a child with an autism diagnosis may need an education, health and care needs assessment, and this should be carried out when it is requested.
- A clear accountability framework should be put in place that requires local authorities and maintained schools, academies and free schools to be clear and transparent about how they are adhering to the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice.
- The Department for Education should review the funding that is available to local authorities to support implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014, and allocate additional funding if it is needed to help complete the transition to the new SEND system.
- Ofsted should be required to monitor implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014 more closely in local areas and should report on it to Parliament annually.
- The local area SEND inspection programme should be made permanent, so that every local area is inspected on a regular basis.
- Local authority staff and school staff should receive training in the requirements of the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice.

# Foreword from Huw Merriman MP and Maria Caulfield MP

## Co-chairs of the inquiry

The APPGA last looked at how the education system works for children on the autism spectrum in 2012, when we published *The right start*.<sup>1</sup> It was clear then that for too many families, securing the right support for their child at school was a very difficult task, and for some families it became an all-consuming battle. It was apparent that autism was not well enough understood in schools, and that autism-specific training and specialist support was not available in all parts of the country where needed.

Since then, the Children and Families Act 2014 has introduced significant reforms to the system for supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England. A large percentage of these children are on the autism spectrum. Three years on from the legislation, the transition to the new system is almost at an end.

However, while the processes around the legal requirements are new, the problems children and families face remain in many ways unchanged. The principles behind the reforms were right, but there have been significant challenges in the implementation. While there are problems with the SEND system that are not specific to children on the autism spectrum, autistic children and young people face particular challenges that need to be addressed by the Government, schools and local authorities if the reforms are to work as legislators intended.

More than one in 100 children are on the autism spectrum. Members of the APPGA have been contacted over the last year by constituents who are struggling to secure the school provision and support



their autistic children need – this may be a place at a specialist school, or support to enable them to thrive and make progress in a mainstream school.

We have heard from parents from across the country about how hard they have to advocate for support for their children. We have heard that the necessary school places are not always available, that children often have to fail before support is provided, and that schools often do not make the adjustments that children on the autism spectrum need in order to succeed.

We also heard that too many families face an uphill struggle to obtain the help and support which their children are legally entitled to. As with all young people, children on the autism spectrum only have one childhood. For each child, there is one opportunity to get it right, and the impact of getting it wrong can be far-reaching for their later lives.

**We also heard that too many families face an uphill struggle to obtain the help and support which their children are legally entitled to.**

<sup>1</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism. (2012). *The right start: reforming the system for children with autism*



We undertook this inquiry to gain a better understanding of why so many families are struggling. We asked questions about how decisions are made about the provision children and young people receive, what support those on the autism spectrum get in school, and how effectively the reformed SEND system is working for them and their families.

It is clear to us that making the system work for children on the autism spectrum, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to receive a good education and achieve their potential, is less about reforming structures, than creating a clear plan for making sure that changes are embedded, cultures in schools are more welcoming and inclusive, and services work together and with parents to make sure that every child on the autism spectrum can get the support they need to thrive at school.

While progress has been made and there is good practice in some areas, much more is needed. We welcome the Government's decision to mandate autism training as part of Initial Teacher Training from September 2018 and their ongoing support for the Autism Education Trust, which provides training for existing teachers. We want to make sure this will have the impact needed, and build on these commitments to make sure that every school is equipped to support autistic pupils.

We urge the Government to look carefully at our report and develop a national autism and education

strategy before the end of 2019 to support local authorities to become more effective commissioners for children on the autism spectrum, and make sure that schools are equipped and welcoming to ensure that autistic pupils can thrive. Leadership from ministers will be crucial in driving forward change and making sure that every child is supported in the way that the law says they should be.



**Huw Merriman MP and Maria Caulfield MP**  
Co-chairs of APPGA Inquiry into Autism and Education

**We urge the Government to look carefully at our report and develop a national autism and education strategy before the end of 2019.**

# Introduction



## What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways. Some autistic people also have learning disabilities, mental health issues or other conditions, meaning people need different levels of support. All people on the autism spectrum learn and develop. With the right sort of support, all can be helped to live a more fulfilling life of their own choosing.

Autistic people have persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction. They may also have restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests. Many autistic people experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, colours, temperatures or pain.<sup>2</sup>

Around one person in 100 is on the autism spectrum. Together with their families they make up over two million people across the UK, or 3,000 in the average parliamentary constituency.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Baird G et al (2006). 'Prevalence of disorders of the autism spectrum in a population cohort of children in South Thames: the Special Needs and Autism Project 'SNAP''. *The Lancet*

During the course of this inquiry, we heard that many children on the autism spectrum are being failed in various ways by the education system. This is demonstrated by the number of requests for statutory assessments that are being refused by local authorities, the long waits for support to be put in place, the difficulty in securing reasonable adjustments in schools, and the high level of exclusions from school of children on the autism spectrum.

Action is needed in the short term to make sure that the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice are fully implemented, and that there is accountability for decisions that are made about the education and support provided to children on the autism spectrum. In the longer term, we urge the Government to develop a national autism and education strategy that addresses the need for better understanding of autism by education providers and commissioners, and more effective commissioning of services and support for children on the autism spectrum.

Autism is the most common type of need for pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan (EHC plan). Autism is the primary need for 27 per cent of these pupils – 31 per cent of boys with a statement or EHC plan, and 16 per cent of girls.<sup>4</sup> More than 70 per cent of children on the autism spectrum in England attend mainstream schools.<sup>5</sup>



During the course of this inquiry, the APPGA heard from a range of expert witnesses, including parents, young people, local authority commissioners, education providers, professionals and advocates. In addition to three evidence sessions in Parliament, we worked with The National Autistic Society to carry out detailed online surveys of parents and carers, young people and teachers. Surveys were completed by 2,573 parents and carers, 176 young people on the autism spectrum, and 308 teachers.

In his evidence to the inquiry, the Chair of the Local Government Association Children's Board, Councillor Richard Watts, described the experience of obtaining the education and support that children on the autism spectrum need as "an inherently hard process that circumstances conspire to make harder". This report explores what some of these circumstances are, and how families' experiences could be improved, so that children on the autism spectrum get the education and support they need.

**"An inherently hard process that circumstances conspire to make harder"**

Councillor Richard Watts, Chair,  
Local Government Association Children's Board

<sup>4</sup> Department for Education. (July 2017). *Special educational needs in England: January 2017*

<sup>5</sup> Department for Education. (July 2017). *Statistics: Special educational needs*

# Making autism better understood in the education system



Autism is sometimes described as an invisible disability – because for many people on the autism spectrum, it is not immediately obvious what their needs are. Parents told us that this can make it difficult for them to get schools and local authorities to take their child’s need for additional support seriously.

While awareness and understanding of autism are growing among the population generally, our inquiry found that time and again many schools and local authorities are still a long way from having a detailed understanding of what it means to be autistic and what support a child might need.

“He is often left upset and has occasionally been put in dangerous and vulnerable situations as he is not ‘autistic enough’ to get the support he needs, yet the staff do not understand enough to give him what he does need”

Parent, response to survey

## What young autistic people told us

Fewer than half of the young people on the autism spectrum who responded to our inquiry's survey say they are happy at school. Seven in ten told us their peers do not understand them, and five in ten said their teachers do not know how to support them.

For many children and young people on the autism spectrum, school is a difficult and isolating experience. But we know that this does not have to be the case – it is not an inevitable fact of being autistic. With the right support, school can become a positive environment and a place where children are able to succeed – but children are not supported well enough, and their parents struggle to get the help they need.

The National Autistic Society's Young Ambassadors Group told us in a written submission that the particular challenges they face at school include bullying and social isolation, being misunderstood by staff and other pupils, and coping with changes to the daily routine, such as a familiar teacher being replaced by a supply teacher.

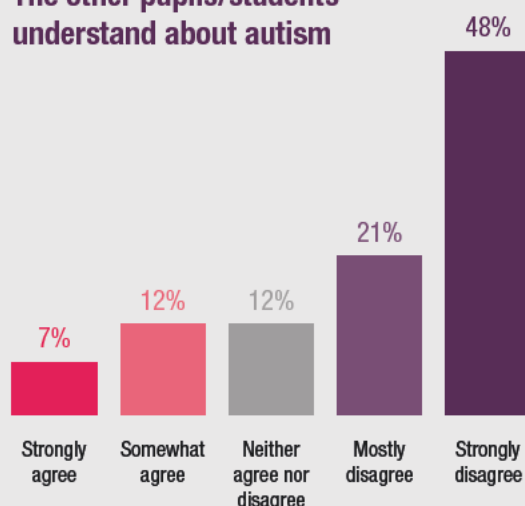
The young people who shared their experiences with us said the things they would like schools to do differently are:

- tackle bullying more effectively
- provide safe spaces, including a quiet room that is always available for autistic pupils to use when they need it
- make sure that teaching assistants are available to help in the classroom
- adjust behaviour policies to recognise the impact autism can have on individuals
- understand that 'meltdowns' are caused by particular situations
- understand that pupils on the autism spectrum may have sensory differences, and may be particularly sensitive to things like noise and lights
- help pupils manage relationships with their classmates.

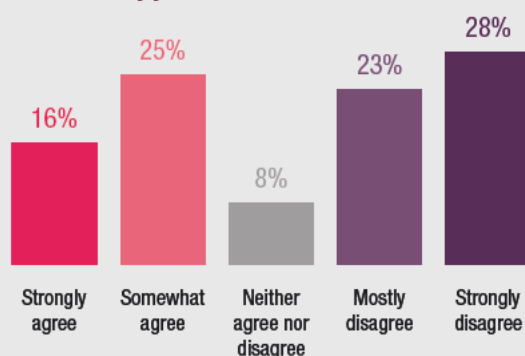
**Figure 1**

We asked, please say how much you agree with these statements:

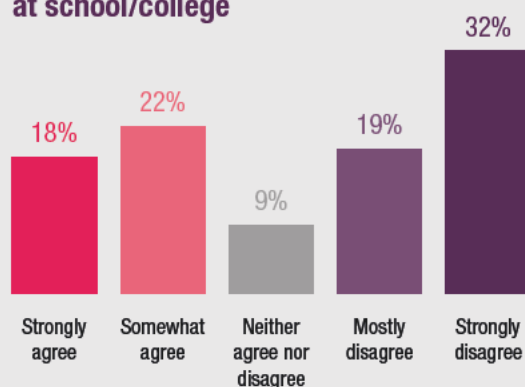
### The other pupils/students understand about autism



### My teachers know how to support me



### I get enough help at school/college



We also heard from two young ambassadors in one of our evidence sessions, who described to us the difficulties that many children on the autism spectrum face in the school playground. One of them, Sam Tanner, said that being at school was like being “a fish in a tank of piranhas”. The other, Lauren Goldsmith, agreed that bullying was a significant problem, saying, “The problem at primary school was that the teachers didn’t understand autism and didn’t help me to tackle the bullies”.

The evidence we gathered showed that young autistic people are much more likely to be happy at school if they get enough of the right kind of support. This includes having teachers who are prepared to communicate clearly and clarify instructions and tasks, opportunities for ‘time out’ during lessons, and somewhere quiet to go during break and lunch times. It may also include support with taking exams, help with college or university applications, and access to therapies at school such as speech and language or occupational therapy. We heard that there is a real need for school policies to be adapted to make sure they work for autistic pupils and that additional help is put in place as necessary.

## Anxiety is misunderstood as bad behaviour

We heard from parents and teachers – both in our surveys and in our evidence sessions – that poor understanding of autism means that children are often punished by schools for what is seen as ‘poor behaviour’, when what is often going on is an expression of how anxious a child is in the school environment.

Schools do not always recognise that the behaviour they see may be a child on the autism spectrum’s attempt to communicate their anxiety, and indicate that their needs are not being met. The school environment may be very difficult for children on the autism spectrum and adjustments should be made to help them cope. A school that does not make these necessary reasonable adjustments – as mandated in the Equality Act 2010 – and instead focuses on the ‘behaviour’ that ensues, is setting a child up to fail.

“It is crucial to students with autism and their families to have specialist support in mainstream schools. This is not always provided to students with a diagnosis and without an EHC plan, who end up having the worst time of their lives without the correct support and understanding.”

Teacher, response to survey

“Schools are too big, busy and noisy. I became really ill because staff kept putting me in the same situation over and over again and didn’t sort out the problem”

Young person on the autism spectrum, response to survey

“Anxiety can be overcome with careful management of the learning environment”

Teacher, response to survey

“They do not understand sensory issues, and how heightened anxiety can stop a child learning”

Parent, response to survey

“I have had to go part-time at work so I could go to the school regularly to try and work with them to meet his needs”

Parent, response to survey

## Children on the autism spectrum are at higher risk of exclusion from school

An important indication that children's needs are not being understood and met is the current high level of school exclusions of children on the autism spectrum. The Department for Education's own figures show that **autistic children are three times more likely to be excluded from school for a fixed period than children who do not have any special educational needs.**<sup>6</sup>

These figures refer to 'official' exclusions, where a child has been legally excluded from school either for a fixed number of days or permanently. They do not address the prevalent and disturbing situation of 'informal' exclusions, where children are sent home early or put on a reduced timetable, without formal notification that they are being excluded.

We are pleased that there is clear statutory guidance that 'informal' or 'unofficial' exclusions are unlawful, regardless of whether they occur with the agreement of parents or carers. The guidance states that any exclusion of a pupil, even for a short period of time, must be formally recorded.<sup>7</sup>

However, the evidence suggests that this guidance is simply being ignored and that children on the autism spectrum are regularly unlawfully excluded, with consequences for their academic progress, self-esteem and mental health. Of the parents who completed our survey, one in four told us that their child had been 'informally' excluded at least once in the last year. Four in ten of the teachers who responded to the survey said that their school had excluded an autistic child, either lawfully or unlawfully, in the last year. Another recent survey by the charity Ambitious about Autism suggested that as many as 26,000 children and young people on the autism spectrum were being unlawfully excluded each year.

This is clearly an issue that comes down to effective enforcement of the current law, rather than requiring new legislation.



"Children are excluded because schools don't understand their problems and don't refer them to therapists for other types of support when needed. The damage is done"

Teacher, response to survey

## What teachers told us

Only one in four teachers who responded to our survey said they had received any autism training while completing their teaching qualification. Nearly eight in ten said they had received some autism training since qualifying – but fewer than half said they feel confident about supporting a child on the autism spectrum in their class.

Confidence levels were higher if the child had an education, health and care (EHC) plan – 41% of teachers said they were confident about supporting a child who has an EHC plan, while only 33% said they were confident about supporting a child who does not have a plan.

For this reason, and the fact that autism is so prevalent, it is essential that all teachers receive good quality autism training. Including this in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) is an essential starting point.<sup>8</sup>

6 Department for Education. (July 2017). *Permanent and fixed-period exclusions in England: 2015 to 2016*

7 Department for Education. (July 2017). *Exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England*

8 Department for Education. (July 2016). *A framework of core content for Initial Teacher Training*

“Autistic pupils are probably the SEN group I need the most guidance with and have received the least guidance on”

Teacher, response to survey

The APPGA has long been calling for teachers and other school staff to have better training and support to teach and support children on the autism spectrum. We were pleased that last year, following a campaign by The National Autistic Society and Ambitious about Autism, the Government agreed that autism should be included in a new framework of content for Initial Teacher Training from September 2018.

The Autism Education Trust (AET), which is funded by the Department for Education, has a strong track record in developing training materials and delivering good quality training to schools. The AET has also published a set of national standards on good autism practice. It should have a key role in contributing to the delivery of the new ITT framework and to ongoing training for teachers and other school staff.



In addition to Initial Teacher Training, it is vital to ensure that there is an ongoing programme of professional development for all educational staff. Jacqui Ver Loren Van Themaat, the autism lead at Swiss Cottage School, a special school in London, told us, “Teacher training providers must think creatively about how to ensure that all trainee teachers gain an understanding of children with autism and other special educational needs and disabilities in a way that is fully built in, not bolted on as an afterthought.”

Our inquiry heard again just how fundamental training and understanding of autism is in making sure that pupils get the right help at school, and we looked at whether what currently exists is sufficient for the change needed.



“The current year long teacher training should help all new teachers focus on how to embed inclusivity in the classroom, while emphasising that there will be a professional expectation for them to deepen their practice through continued learning and developing beyond their Initial Teacher Training year, their newly qualified teacher year and beyond”

Jacqui Ver Loren Van Themaat,  
Swiss Cottage School, London, oral evidence to inquiry

## Embedding understanding across the whole school

A culture of understanding needs to begin at the top of any organisation, including schools. One of the key themes from our witness sessions was the importance of a school culture in which the needs of children and young people on the autism spectrum are understood and respected.

Our witnesses were clear that this begins with head teachers. Bob Lowndes, Director of the AET, highlighted how key head teachers are for setting the tone for their school and for the wider school community. Witnesses recommended that all head teachers should have autism training to enable them to make necessary adjustments to the school environment and to understand why the adjustments are needed.

When we asked teachers about the attitude of non-autistic pupils to their fellow pupils who are on the autism spectrum, 89% said that other pupils tend to be at least somewhat understanding. A teacher with an autism outreach role with a local authority said, "This tends to depend on the attitude of the school staff towards the pupils with autism".

## Schools need to work together to share autism expertise

We were particularly interested to hear about examples of schools and teachers sharing their autism expertise with each other. This can be through special schools working with mainstream schools in their area (for example, mainstream teaching assistants can spend time in special schools to learn about particular types of need and strategies to meet them), and through 'satellite' schools and classrooms, where special schools bring their expertise into the wider community.

There should be more systematic sharing of expertise between schools, especially between special schools and mainstream schools. Local schools forums may have a role to play in overseeing this.

"The school shattered my confidence – they had no understanding...they were unable to provide 'reasonable adjustments'"

Young person on the autism spectrum, response to survey



## What needs to happen

A key theme that came up time and again in our inquiry was that all education staff need to understand autism. Making sure that schools as a whole have practices that are autism-friendly is vital in ensuring that children on the autism spectrum can access an education. The Government have made a welcome start on this by requiring that all teachers learn about autism as part of their initial training and by continuing to fund the Autism Education Trust. However, it is also important that all current teachers and other school staff understand autism and are encouraged to participate in effective, good quality autism training.

## Recommendations

The Government should develop an autism and education strategy by the end of 2019 that:

- builds on the inclusion of autism in Initial Teacher Training courses and on the work of the Autism Education Trust, and includes a workforce development plan on autism for the education system
- includes ongoing funding for the Autism Education Trust, so they can continue to deliver autism training to schools
- ensures that autism and SEND more widely are fully built into professional development for all head teachers
- makes provision for a specialist curriculum for all pupils on the autism spectrum who need one
- sets out the types of reasonable adjustments that may need to be made for children and young people on the autism spectrum in school to help ensure they are supported effectively
- sets out strategies for improving autism awareness and understanding across a whole school to help reduce bullying and improve inclusion
- sets out how special schools and mainstream schools can better support each other
- sets out a clear procedure for reporting unlawful exclusions from school
- makes clear which bodies are responsible for holding schools to account for the education and support they provide to children on the autism spectrum.

Local authorities should:

- develop 'hubs', or centres of excellence (which could be special schools or mainstream schools), where educators can develop and share their expertise<sup>9</sup>
- encourage schools in their area to share good practice and support each other to support autistic pupils more effectively
- make sure that schools in their area are taking on training from the Autism Education Trust.

Schools should:

- encourage staff to make use of existing resources on autism, such as the MyWorld teaching resources provided by The National Autistic Society and training courses delivered by the Autism Education Trust
- take part in initiatives like Schools' Autism Awareness Week to improve awareness and understanding of autism in their school
- ensure that all school leaders and governors receive training in autism awareness.

9 Autism Education Trust. (2011). *What is good practice in autism education?*

# Commissioning and planning support



Understanding the impact of autism and how it can affect the way children learn and interact at school is a necessary starting point. But for children to thrive and succeed, the right services and support must be available in their area.

## Identifying unmet needs

In our survey, we asked parents to tell us what type of support they believe their child needs, both inside and outside school, and what they currently receive. There was a gap across all types of support between what is needed and what is received, with the gulf particularly wide in buddying/befriending services and short break services – nearly 75% of parents say that these services would help them, but they do not receive them.

The Local Offer, and children's individual EHC plans, should be used as a commissioning tool to help local

“Parents have to fill in the gaps. For parents of children who have severe needs, everything is a struggle – so they may have no time or energy to fight”

Parent, response to survey

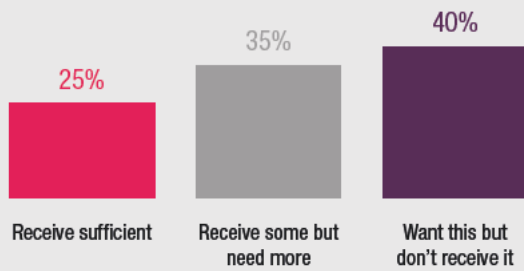
authorities identify where the gaps are, and as a starting point for working with partner organisations to develop and deliver the services children need.

Forty per cent of parents in the survey told us that their child's school place does not fully meet their needs, with a similar number saying they do not believe their child is making good progress with their education.

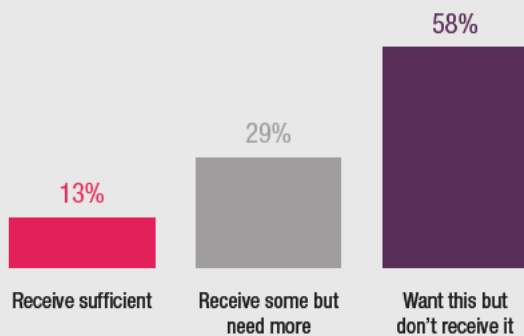
**Figure 2**

We asked about the types of support that parents want their child to receive, and what they actually receive

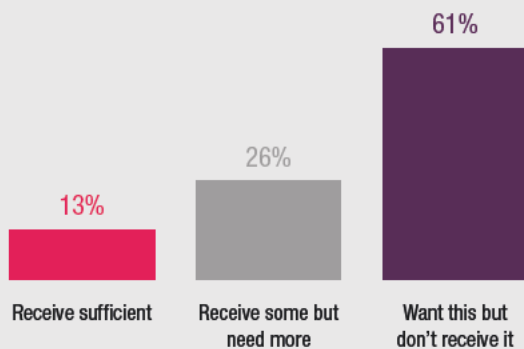
### Speech and language therapy



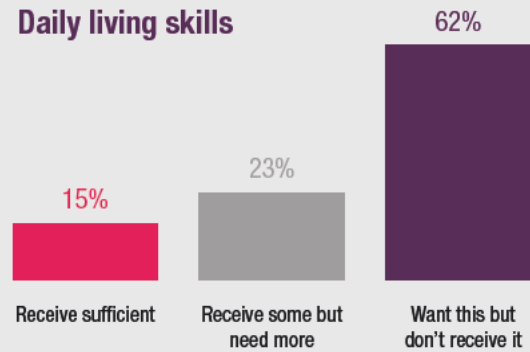
### Mental health support



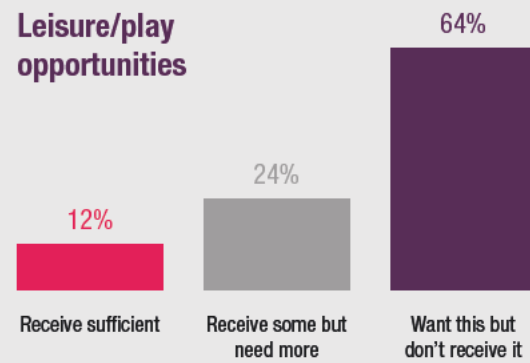
### Occupational therapy



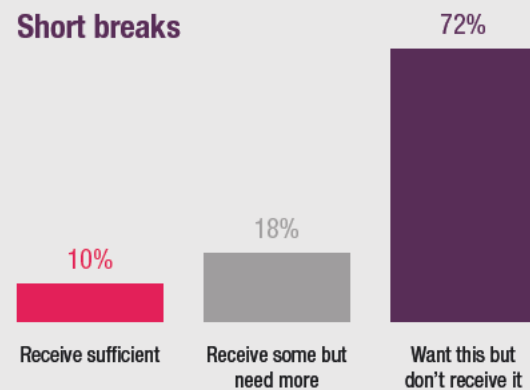
### Daily living skills



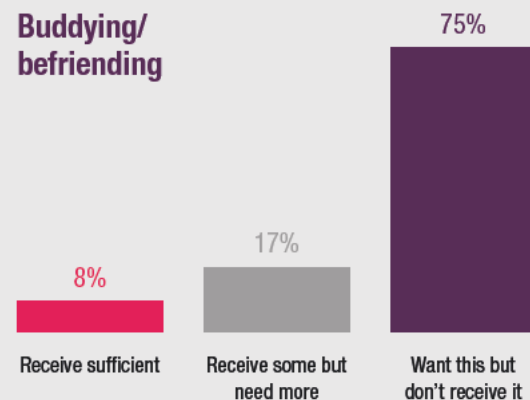
### Leisure/play opportunities



### Short breaks



### Buddying/befriending



We heard about some scenarios where there is no school available that meets a child's needs, and the child is out of the education system entirely, sometimes for years. Ofsted described these children to us as a 'hidden group', and acknowledged that they do not know how many of them there are, or what level of academic progress they may be making. Some parents feel forced to home-school their children because there is no appropriate school provision locally. However, in other cases, children may receive a package of 'education other than at school' that works better for the individual child than a place at school.

### Understanding local needs and planning ahead

While local authorities have less power to place children in specific schools than in previous years, they still have a vital strategic commissioning role to play in shaping the local landscape of educational provision. They must work with schools and other organisations to ensure that provision exists to meet the full spectrum of children's needs.

This requires careful collection of data about who lives in the area the authority covers, and a good understanding of what the data shows. Dame Christine Lenehan told us, "The best local authorities are those that understand their own data". Local authorities should know how many children on the autism spectrum live in their local area, what their particular needs are, where children go to school, and where they go after they leave school.

"Inclusion and cuts don't go together"

Tania Tirraoro, Founder,  
Special Needs Jungle, oral evidence to inquiry

"It is not clear enough what 'good' looks like in relation to autism"

Dame Christine Lenehan, Director, Council  
for Disabled Children, oral evidence to inquiry

They should use this data to plan the 'pipeline', identifying children with particular needs who will need particular provision now and in the future. Knowing where children go after they leave school is particularly important for making sure that schools are equipping children for adult life, we heard from witnesses.

Local authorities should map what their existing provision looks like and work out where they will get any necessary additional support from. It may come from neighbouring boroughs or counties or from independent organisations, or councils may need to develop provision of their own. It should not be necessary, for example, for a London borough to place a child on the autism spectrum at a school in Wales, but we heard that this has indeed happened.



“Local authorities need to ensure they have adequate services based on identified local needs”

Vivian Hill, British Psychological Society and UCL Institute of Education, oral evidence to inquiry



Decisions about where a child goes to school may be made by a local decision-making panel. It is essential that these panels are focused on the individual needs of the child whose future they are deciding, and that they have a good understanding both of autism and of what different types of school provision look like.

We heard that, too often, children on the autism spectrum have to fail repeatedly before they get a school place that meets their needs. This can be devastating for their school experience and their later lives, as well as being a poor use of local resources.

Effective strategic commissioning will often mean working with neighbouring authorities to jointly commission specialist services that only a small number of children will need. It will also mean working with health and social care partners to put the necessary support in place to meet the full range of a child's needs, so that they can achieve the best possible results.

“There needs to be some agreed and defined minimum level of provision for children with autism in each local authority”

Vivian Hill, British Psychological Society and UCL Institute of Education, oral evidence to inquiry

“In some cases, parents fight through the Tribunal to get their child a place at a residential school. On the other hand, a local authority may make a residential placement because they have run out of other options”

Dame Christine Lenehan, Director, Council for Disabled Children, oral evidence to inquiry

### Creating a local model of support that works for every child on the autism spectrum

Children on the autism spectrum have a wide range of needs. Obviously, there is no single type of educational provision that will work for all of these children. Local commissioners need to use their data on the local picture of special educational needs, and work with all education providers, and parents in their area, to be ready to meet these needs.

There are some areas where there is a range of provision to meet the needs of children on the autism spectrum. Other areas have very little specialist provision, and children have to travel quite far to access it.

Talking to parents and looking at evidence from our survey, what comes across clearly is that parents want their child to be in an education setting where autism and the needs that arise from it are well understood. This may be in a mainstream school with good support, or it may be in a special school or autism-specific specialist school. All of these types of provision are necessary, as one size will not fit all. There was also a clear message around quality from parents in one of our sessions. They spoke passionately about how important it was that schools were aspirational for children on the autism spectrum. One parent whose child has limited verbal communication and has learning disabilities was clear that some schools saw their role as 'babysitting' rather than helping children to progress. This was unacceptable, she argued.

There can be a high level of variability between schools in the same local area in terms of the SEND support provided and how much particular needs such as autism are understood. A good example is the educational psychology service, which is central to the education, health and care needs assessment process; some local authorities invest in it, and make it available to all schools in their area, while others leave it up to schools, with the result that some schools opt for very little provision.

We heard from various witnesses that the diminishing role of local authorities in mainstream schools, and the increasing fragmentation of the school system has had the effect of reducing the availability of specialist autism support teams in some areas.

Where specialist autism services exist, they are highly valued and facilitate mutual support between special schools and the wider community.

The evidence submitted to our inquiry raises two broad groups of children and young people on the autism spectrum who are particularly poorly served by the current education system. One is young people of secondary school age who are academically able but who struggle to cope in a mainstream secondary school environment. The parents of some of these children made clear that in many areas, existing mainstream provision is not set up so that they are able to fulfil their academic potential. Some suggested that their children needed a more specialist setting to receive an education in

“My son is academically able but struggles in the mainstream environment due to his sensory needs”

Parent, response to survey

an environment that suited their particular needs, and to receive any extra support they needed with things like communication and social interaction. Few of these types of school exist. Improving the ability of mainstream schools to support this cohort of children is vital to ensuring they can get the right help in an inclusive setting, but in some cases a special school may still be necessary.

The other group is children on the autism spectrum who also have a learning disability and complex needs, and whose behaviour may be perceived as challenging. This latter group of children may end up in residential schools, sometimes a long way from their homes, not because a positive decision has been made that this is the best educational opportunity for them but because everything else has been tried, and has failed. Good quality residential schools where the full range of a child's need can be met around the clock may be the best option for some children on the autism spectrum, but this needs to be the result of careful decision-making and not a last resort.

## What needs to happen

The frustration from parents trying to find the right provision for their children was clear in our evidence sessions. Parents described how they built up packages of support for their children to get the right help or how their children were failed over and over again with a school placement that just didn't work for them.

There needs to be clearer and smarter commissioning at a local, regional and in some cases possibly national level to make sure that the right mix of provision is available and that parents, who know their child best, are given clear options for school placements.

## Recommendations

The Government should develop an autism and education strategy which:

- sets out the educational provision and support that children on the autism spectrum are entitled to, and what good provision looks like, based on the large amount of evidence that exists. This should help local decision-makers to see which type of provision is best suited to each individual child
- includes modelling to help local authorities commission provision that meets the full range of needs of children on the autism spectrum, and ensures that all types of educational provision are planned for in every area. This might not necessarily mean that every area should provide specialist services, but that arrangements are in place in neighbouring areas for children who need more specialised provision
- sets out guidance for local authorities on the pathway between a diagnosis of autism and the right educational support
- develops pathways between clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and local authorities, so that a diagnosis of autism leads automatically to a decision about whether a statutory education, health and care needs assessment should be carried out
- requires schools to work with local mental health services to ensure that children on the autism spectrum receive any mental health support they need before their mental health problems get worse
- recognises the role of further education colleges and ensures they have the resources they need to support all students who are on the autism spectrum.

Local authorities should:

- collect and analyse data on the number of children and young people on the autism spectrum in their area, and on the profile of their needs, and use this data to plan and commission the services they will need. This should be done in partnership with other local authorities where it is more efficient, for example for high-cost, specialised services
- assess whether they have the correct 'portfolio' of schools in their area, or neighbouring areas, to meet the full range of needs of children and young people on the autism spectrum and prevent children having to be sent to more distant and costly school placements
- carry out education, health and care needs assessments for children with an autism diagnosis when they are requested, so that a child who needs an EHC plan has access to one as early as possible in their school career
- work with schools where they have placed children on the autism spectrum to ensure they are providing a quality education and are measuring what young people achieve and where they go after they leave school.

Schools should:

- make sure they are measuring the progress of all pupils on the autism spectrum across the four areas of need set out in the SEND Code of Practice
- record where pupils go after they leave school to help assure themselves that they are equipping pupils on the autism spectrum for adult life as effectively as possible.

# Implementing the SEND reforms



This year marks three years from the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014, which overhauled the system for supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England.

A key aim of the Act was to make the system ‘less confrontational and more efficient’<sup>10</sup>, according to the ministerial foreword. The reformed system was intended to identify children’s needs early and put support in place quickly, involve young people and their parents and carers in decision-making, and focus more explicitly on what children achieve in life.

We wanted to find out what impact the changes have had. We heard that the system has the potential to work well and was underpinned by the right principles. But we also heard a clear message that families are having to fight for support to be put in place, children often have to wait a long time for their needs to be assessed and met, and the system lacks accountability for the decisions that are made.

“We are stuck in a system that wants the child to fail before help is offered.”

Parent, response to survey

## Delays in assessing children’s needs

While some children on the autism spectrum require a level of support that schools may be able to meet using their existing resources, many need more support. The process for getting this support begins with a statutory assessment of a child’s needs by their local authority.

Seventy eight per cent of parents who responded to our survey told us that it has not been easy to get the support their child needs. This begins with delays in carrying out an assessment – or, in many cases, agreeing that an assessment is required.

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education/Department of Health. (January 2015). *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*

Once a child has a diagnosis of autism, their local authority should expect to carry out an assessment of their education, health and care needs, if and when this is requested, on the basis that a child who is on the autism spectrum is likely to be a child with special educational needs.

Seventy per cent of parents who responded to the survey stated that support was not put in place soon enough for their child, with **nearly 70% waiting more than six months and 50% waiting more than a year.**

**“I hate seeing my child so broken just at the thought of having to go to school”**

Parent, response to survey

## Getting an assessment

The SEND Code of Practice states that “a local authority must conduct an assessment of education, health and care needs when it considers that it may be necessary for special educational provision to be made for the child or young person”<sup>11</sup>.

‘May be necessary’ is a low threshold, and we would expect local authorities to carry out an

assessment before deciding whether special educational provision is required for a child. We are told that in practice, local authorities sometimes decide whether provision will be needed or not without conducting an assessment. This is contrary to the Code of Practice, and results in delays in putting the support that children need in place.

Forty two per cent of parents in our survey told us that their local authority refused to carry out an assessment of their child’s needs the first time it was requested. This is not dissimilar to the Department for Education’s own figures, published earlier this year, which state that there was a jump of 35% in the number of requests for education, health and care assessments that were refused by local authorities from 2015 to 2016.<sup>12</sup> A number of our witnesses attributed this to funding constraints, and one witness suggested that refusing to carry out assessments is a way in which local authorities ‘gatekeep’ resources.

Children on the autism spectrum often need to be assessed by a number of professionals, including occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and mental health professionals, to build up a full picture of their needs, which may be quite complex. This is in addition to assessment by educational psychologists, who are the linchpin of the education, health and care assessment process.

However, in our evidence sessions, we heard that this specialist input was often not available. Many parents told us that because their local authority didn’t request assessments by key professionals that would enable their child to get the school provision they need, they have paid for their own independent reports. Getting the right support should not depend on having the means to gather the evidence that local authorities should be sourcing.

**“This situation is leading to huge inequalities and unmet needs that will potentially lead to school exclusion, placements in special provision and escalating costs for the local authority”**

Vivian Hill, British Psychological Society, oral evidence to inquiry

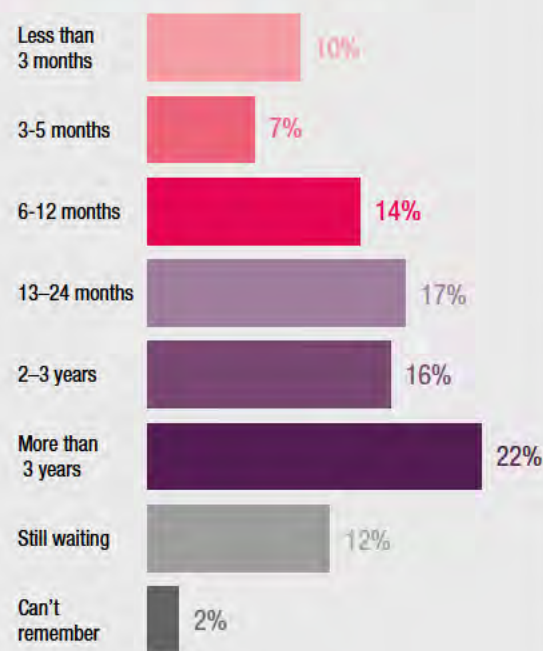
<sup>11</sup> Department for Education/Department of Health. (January 2015). *Education, health and care needs assessments and plans, Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0-25 years*

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education. (May 2017). *Statements of SEN and EHC plans: England, 2017*

In our survey, we asked parents how long they waited, after they first raised concerns, for their child to receive support.

**Figure 3**

**How long parents report waiting for their child to receive support:**



“Schools do not routinely follow the SEND Code of Practice to ensure that needs are effectively identified and often adopt a culture of ‘parental blame’, which may delay the identification of autism”

Catherine Mackinlay, parent, written evidence to inquiry

**Meeting obligations to children under the Children and Families Act 2014**

The Children and Families Act 2014 was widely welcomed when it was passed. There does not appear to be any disagreement with the principles underpinning the SEND Code of Practice<sup>13</sup>. It explicitly outlines the importance of involving parents and young people in decision-making about the support provided, the importance of education, health and care services working together and the importance of local authorities identifying need and ensuring that support is put in place in a timely way.

The local authority leaders who gave evidence to our inquiry told us that they struggle to provide more than statutory obligations require. However, the stories we heard from parents cast serious doubt on whether all local authorities are able to meet even statutory duties.

We asked parents about their experience of obtaining an EHC plan for their child. Only one in ten parents who responded to the survey said they were ‘very satisfied’ with the process of agreeing an education, health and care plan for their child, with 60% saying they were dissatisfied. Just over half the parents who responded said they were fully involved in discussions about their child’s EHC plan. More than 40% of parents said that their child was not involved in this process at all, despite the clear requirement in the legislation that local authorities must consider the views and wishes of both the child and their parents, and enable them to participate in decisions.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>13</sup> Department for Education/Department of Health. (January 2015). *Chapter 1: Principles, Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0-25 years*

<sup>14</sup> Children and Families Act 2014, Section 19

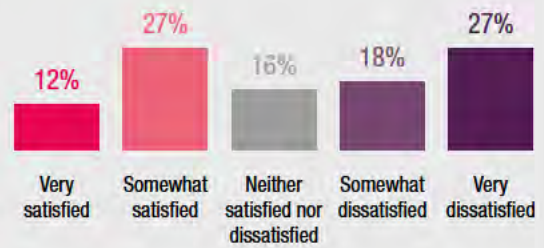
**Figure 4**

Parents' satisfaction with different elements of EHC plans

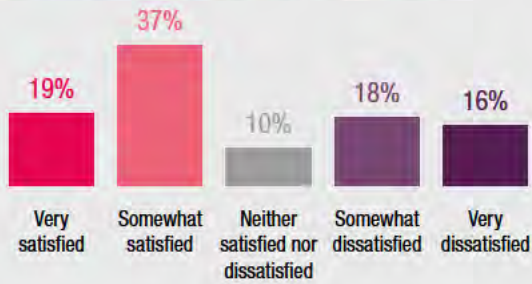
**The description of my child and their needs**



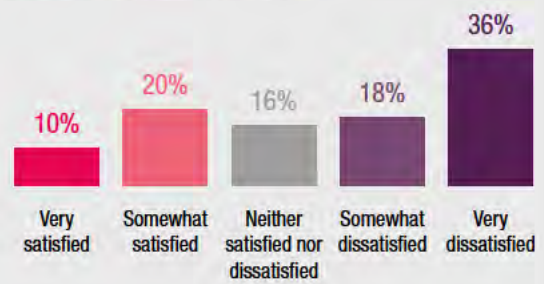
**Health provision**



**The outcomes set out for my child**



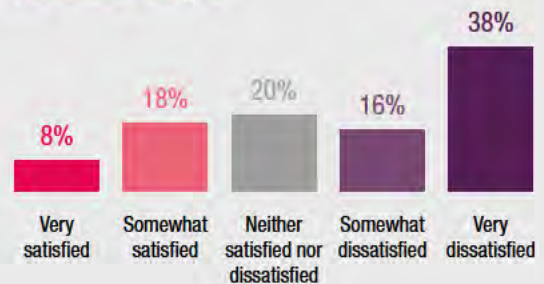
**Social care provision**



**Education provision**



**Personal budget**



We heard from many parents that they were given misleading information about things such as the process of applying for an EHC plan for their child. Some of the false ‘facts’ that parents say they were told include: “a child’s school has to support an application for EHC assessment”, “EHC plans are

not available to children below a certain age in this area”, “a child will not receive any different support with an EHC plan than they would get without one”. Some of the teachers who responded to our survey expressed the view that EHC plans are hard to get. One respondent said, “For every child with an

EHC plan, there are more with equal needs who cannot access the support they require". Another teacher commented that the value of a child's EHC plan "depends on how well written it is. It's very dependent on parents being vigilant and not accepting a poorly written plan".

We have noted from witnesses that, while local authorities have responsibility for writing EHC plans, many of them delegate this task to schools. While this makes sense in some ways, given the knowledge that schools have (or should have) of the individual child and their needs, it can be a complex and time-consuming task, particularly for schools that have a large number of children with special educational needs, and for special schools. Local authorities should ensure that some of the resources they have received from the Department for Education to support the transfer of children from SEN statements to EHC plans are allocated to schools, if they require schools to take the leading role in this process.

## Reducing conflict between families and local authorities

What came across very clearly in all our discussions about educational provision for children and young people on the autism spectrum is how hard parents fight for their children's needs to be understood and met. The language of conflict pervaded much of the evidence gathered by our inquiry, whether through surveys, written evidence or in person in our evidence sessions. In the worst cases, relationships between families and local authorities had broken down completely.

In one evidence session, we heard from local authorities who suggested that there will always be disagreements with parents about what is best for their children, and what is possible. Many of the parents we heard from believe that local authorities make decisions primarily on financial grounds – while some local authorities believe that parents have unrealistic expectations of what can be provided.

Parents told us they need to be able to believe that local authorities are committed to following the SEND Code of Practice and to making decisions about their child based on what is best for the child.

"The SEND Code of Practice is not prescriptive enough on what happens in schools."

Tania Tirraoro, Founder,  
Special Needs Jungle, oral evidence to inquiry



"I don't want to fight, but I feel like I have to"

Parent, response to survey

The evidence we received from local authorities is that their decision-making is not black and white. They acknowledge that decisions will typically be based on a combination of the child's needs and the available funds, and admit that it is often impossible to agree to everything a child on the autism spectrum might need.

A lack of resources is insufficient reason to fail to meet all a child's needs. The Government needs to ensure that local authorities have the funding required to meet those needs. However, it's also important that these issues are discussed openly with parents. Including parents in early conversations about how to make best use of available resources and having proper discussions about their child's education and support needs could increase the chances of finding a solution that works for the child

and satisfies everyone. Keeping families at arm's length, and requiring them to potentially initiate legal appeal proceedings before any compromise is discussed, sets the two 'sides' up as opponents when they should be working together.

Parents who are knowledgeable and determined can make the system work for their child, but often at great cost to their family. The onus currently appears to be on parents to know what to ask for, and who, when and how to ask. We heard that, for many families, the only way to get the educational provision their child needs is to appeal to the SEND Tribunal. This is a sign that the system is not functioning as it should to provide support for autistic children, and means that families and local authorities are spending resources on fighting each other rather than supporting children.

**“Not all parents have the time, money or education needed to appeal. Some parents don't know they have a voice.”**

Tamsin Green, Parent, oral evidence to inquiry

While many parents are outstanding advocates for their children, good achievement should not depend on parents being prepared to fight. Not all parents have the knowledge of the system, or the financial and personal resources, to challenge decisions that are made about their child. Indeed, as one witness commented, “Some parents don't know they have had a bad experience”.

## Understanding what families want

Families told us that they want the following things:

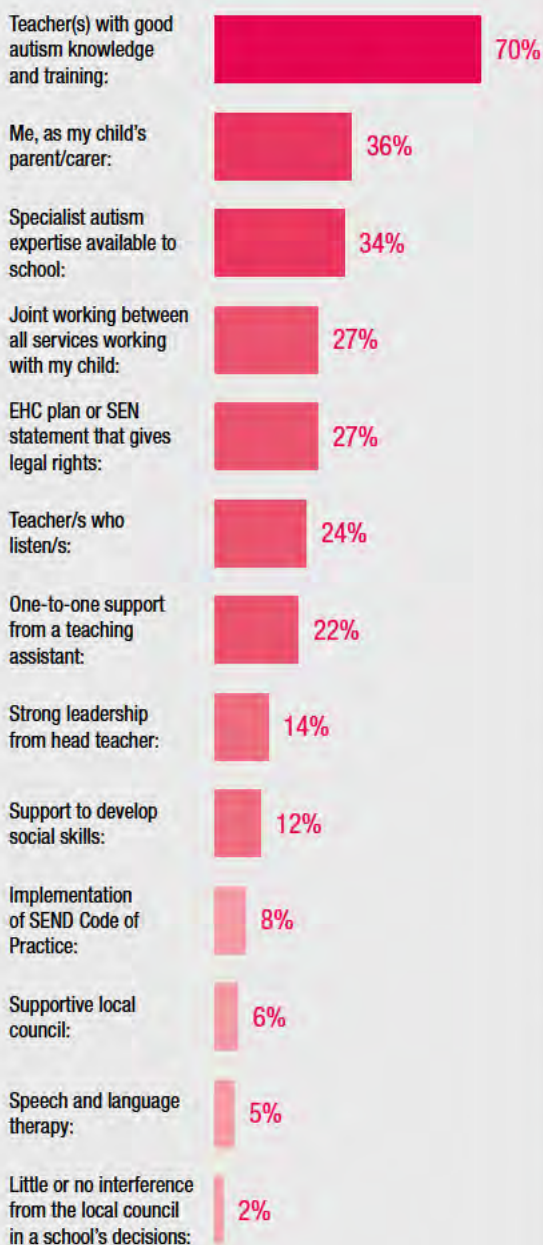
- for their child to be surrounded by as much autism expertise as possible, whatever their school setting
- good quality information about the educational provision that is available in their area. In our survey, 65 per cent of parents who responded said they had not received enough information and support to help them understand what was available for their child
- transparency and accountability for decisions that are made about their child
- local authorities and education providers that adhere to the law and the SEND Code of Practice
- confidence that their local authority is on their side in helping their child live the best life possible.



In our survey, we asked parents to pick the top three factors they thought would make the biggest difference to getting the right education for their child.

**Figure 3**

**What parents believe makes the biggest difference to their child's education:**



**Lack of accountability by decision-makers**

The SEND Code of Practice sets out how the reformed SEND system should work in detail. For children on the autism spectrum and their parents, this depends on local decision-makers – which in practice means schools and SEND departments in local authorities, and other agencies such as the NHS and social care – implementing the Code and putting the principles that underpin the new system into practice. There is a gap between what the law says should happen and what families experience.

One of the biggest frustrations witnesses voiced to the inquiry is the apparent lack of accountability in enforcing children's legal rights to assessment and support. As more than one witness observed to us, "It doesn't matter what the law says: if there is no accountability, it won't be enforced."

Parents told us that an organisation that is independent of the Government should hold both central government and local authorities to account on the implementation of the SEND reforms. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission have an important role to play through the local area SEND inspection process. We believe that these inspections should not be a one-off event for local areas, and should continue beyond the current five year programme.

Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that the needs of all children with SEND in their area are identified and met. Yet as more schools have academy or free school status – particularly at secondary level – local authorities have less power to direct schools to accept individual pupils.

Power lies increasingly with schools, rather than with local authority commissioners, with the result that it is harder than ever for some children on the autism spectrum to get a school place that meets their needs. It is not clear how to resolve this. However, local authorities should still have confidence to say to schools that they are not fulfilling their responsibilities to children with SEND under the SEND Code of Practice.

**"It doesn't matter what the law says: if there is no accountability, it won't be enforced"**

Alicia McColl, Parent, oral evidence to inquiry

## What needs to happen

Time and again, the key thing that parents told us needed to change, was for local authorities and schools to properly follow the law as set out in the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice, and to be held accountable when they don't.

They also expressed concern that they often knew more about legal duties on local authorities and schools than local authority staff and school staff. Accountability and the language of the battlefield came through very strongly.

Local authorities told us they were financially stretched, which presents challenges in implementing the new system effectively. They also told us that with an increase in the number of academies and free schools, it had become harder for them to hold schools to account for the way they were following the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice.

## Recommendations

The Government should:

- develop an accountability framework that requires local authorities and schools to be clear and transparent about their adherence to the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice
- review the funding that is available to local authorities to support implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014, and allocate additional funding if it is needed to help complete the transition to the new SEND system
- identify and share good practice in implementation of the Children and Families Act
- require Ofsted to monitor implementation of the Children and Families Act more closely and report on it to Parliament annually. After each local area SEND inspection has taken place, Ofsted should make a return visit to check that any required improvements have been made
- make the local area SEND inspection programme permanent, so that each local area is inspected on a regular basis, not just once during the current single five year period
- ask the Tribunals Service to publish statistics on the number of appeals that are accepted by local authorities within seven days of the hearing date, and highlight local authority areas where there are large numbers of late concessions.

Local authorities should:

- ensure their staff are trained in the requirements of the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice
- ensure that staff are having open and transparent discussions with parents, providing them with clear information about available options and working with them to find suitable packages of support.

Schools should:

- ensure their staff are trained in the requirements of the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice.

# Conclusion



For many children on the autism spectrum and their families, it is a struggle to get the right school place, an assessment of their needs, additional support from health services, access to out-of-school support, and other support. We heard that, for some children, their educational experience becomes a pathway of failure.

Ensuring the proper and full implementation of the Children and Families Act will go some way to addressing this, and many of our recommendations focus on how to make that happen. The reforms the Act introduced are the right reforms, based on the right principles, but our inquiry highlighted that more trust, expertise and resources are urgently required.

However, even if progress is made in implementing the Act, key challenges will remain for local authorities, schools and teachers, in making sure that autistic children and young people get the right support to thrive at school.

Notably, the Department for Education has to work with training providers, councils and schools to ensure that understanding of autism is embedded at every level of the system to support a cultural change in making sure the right help is sought out and provided for autistic children as they access education.

More widely, at national, regional and local level, action is needed to make sure there is a better and more ambitious vision of ‘what good looks like’ for children and young people on the autism spectrum. It is also necessary to make sure the right portfolio of provision is available so that autistic children can be supported and educated in an environment that is the most appropriate for their needs.

The Government should be ambitious for these children and young people, which is why we are calling on them to develop a national strategy on autism and education so that the system is set up for every autistic child or young person to be supported to achieve their potential.

# Summary of recommendations



## The Government needs to:

- Develop a national autism and education strategy by the end of 2019 that:
  - builds on the inclusion of autism in Initial Teacher Training courses and on the work of the Autism Education Trust, and includes a workforce development plan on autism for the education system
  - includes ongoing funding for the Autism Education Trust, so they can continue to deliver autism training to schools
  - ensures that autism, and SEND more widely, are fully built into professional development for all head teachers
  - makes provision for a specialist curriculum for all pupils on the autism spectrum who need one
  - sets out the types of reasonable adjustments that may be needed for children and young people on the autism spectrum in school, to help ensure they are supported effectively
  - sets out strategies for improving autism awareness and understanding across a whole school to help reduce bullying and improve inclusion
  - sets out how special schools and mainstream schools can better support each other
  - sets out a clear procedure for reporting unlawful exclusions from school
  - makes clear which bodies are responsible for holding schools to account for the education and support they provide to children on the autism spectrum
  - sets out the educational provision and support that children on the autism spectrum are entitled to, and what good provision looks like, based on the large amount of evidence that exists. This should help local decision-makers see which type of provision is best suited to each individual child
  - includes modelling to help local authorities commission provision that meets the full range of needs of children on the autism spectrum, and ensures that all types of educational provision are planned for in every area. This might not necessarily mean that every area should provide specialist services, but that arrangements should be in place in neighbouring areas for children who need more specialised provision
  - sets out guidance for local authorities on the pathway between a diagnosis of autism and the right educational support
  - develops pathways between clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and local authorities, so that a diagnosis of autism leads automatically to a decision about whether a statutory education, health and care needs assessment should be carried out

- requires schools to work with local mental health services to ensure that children on the autism spectrum receive any mental health support they need before their mental health problems get worse
- recognises the role of further education colleges and ensures they have the resources they need to support all students who are on the autism spectrum.
- develop an accountability framework that requires local authorities and schools to be clear and transparent about their adherence to the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice
- review the funding that is available to local authorities to support implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014, and allocate additional funding if it is needed to help complete the transition to the new SEND system
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- make the local area SEND inspection programme permanent, so that each local area is inspected on a regular basis, not just once during the current single five year period
- ask the Tribunals Service to publish statistics on the number of appeals that are accepted by local authorities within seven days of the hearing date, and highlight local authority areas where there are large numbers of late concessions.

### **Local authorities need to:**

- develop ‘hubs’, or centres of excellence (which could be special schools or mainstream schools), where educators can develop and share their expertise
- encourage schools in their area to share good practice and support each other to support autistic pupils more effectively
- make sure schools in their area are taking on training from the Autism Education Trust
- collect and analyse data on the number of children and young people on the autism spectrum in their area, and on the profile of their needs, and use this data to plan and commission the services they will need. This should be done in partnership with other local authorities where it is more efficient, for example for high-cost, specialised services

- assess whether they have the correct portfolio of schools in their area, or neighbouring areas, to meet the full range of needs of children and young people on the autism spectrum and to prevent children having to be sent to more distant and costly school placements
- carry out education, health and care needs assessments for children with an autism diagnosis when they are requested, so that a child who needs an EHC plan has access to one as early as possible in their school career
- work with schools where they have placed children on the autism spectrum to make sure they are providing a quality education and are measuring what young people achieve and where they go after they leave school
- ensure their staff are trained in the requirements of the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice
- ensure that staff are having open and transparent discussions with parents, providing them with clear information about available options and working with them to find suitable packages of support.

### **Schools need to:**

- encourage staff to make use of existing resources on autism, such as the MyWorld teaching resources provided by The National Autistic Society and materials produced by the Autism Education Trust
- take part in initiatives like Schools' Autism Awareness Week to improve awareness and understanding of autism in their school
- ensure that all school governors receive training in autism awareness
- make sure they are measuring the progress of all pupils on the autism spectrum across the four areas of need set out in the SEND Code of Practice, and that they are recording where young people go after they leave school to help assure themselves that they are equipping pupils on the autism spectrum as effectively as possible for adult life
- make sure their staff are trained in the requirements of the Children and Families Act and the SEND Code of Practice.

# About this report

This report is based on an inquiry conducted by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA) between April 2017 and July 2017. This included three online surveys, completed by 176 young people on the autism spectrum, 2,573 parents and carers, and 308 teachers from across England.

MPs and peers also heard oral evidence during three evidence sessions at the House of Commons from young people on the autism spectrum, parents, teachers and other practitioners, inspectors, elected councillors, and other professionals.

The APPGA also received a number of written submissions from individuals and organisations.

## EVIDENCE SESSIONS

### Oral evidence session one

Tuesday 18 April 2017

#### Panel:

Huw Merriman MP (Chair)  
Maria Caulfield MP  
Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP  
Lord Lucas  
Lord Sterling  
Justin Cooke, Ambitious about Autism  
Sarah Lambert, The National Autistic Society  
Professor Liz Pellicano, Centre for Research on Autism and Education (CRAE)

#### Witnesses:

Councillor Anntoinette Bramble, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, London Borough of Hackney  
Dr Vivian Hill, Educational psychologist, British Psychological Society and UCL Institute of Education  
Catherine Mackinlay, Parent  
Julie Newman,  
Learning in Harmony Multi-Academy Trust  
Dianne Rochford,  
Learning in Harmony Multi-Academy Trust  
Councillor Richard Watts, Chair,  
Local Government Association Children's Board

### Oral evidence session two

Tuesday 11 July 2017

#### Panel:

Maria Caulfield MP (Chair)  
Thangam Debbonaire MP  
Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP  
Huw Merriman MP  
Lord Maginnis  
Lord Sterling  
Baroness Uddin  
Lord Warner  
Justin Cooke, Ambitious about Autism  
Sarah Lambert, The National Autistic Society

#### Witnesses:

Matthew Barnes, Ofsted  
Nigel Evans, Ofsted  
Monica Gaweda, Swiss Cottage Special School  
Jacqui Ver Loren Van Themaat,  
Swiss Cottage Special School  
Sharonne Horlock, Parent,  
SENCO at Impington Village College,  
Member of NAHT Autism and Girls Forum  
Bob Lowndes, Director, Autism Education Trust  
Lauren Goldsmith,  
National Autistic Society Young Ambassador  
Sam Tanner,  
National Autistic Society Young Ambassador

## **Oral evidence session three**

Tuesday 18 July 2017

### **Panel:**

Huw Merriman MP (Chair)

Maria Caulfield MP

Adam Holloway MP

Lord Sterling

Baroness Uddin

Justin Cooke, Ambitious about Autism

Sarah Lambert, The National Autistic Society

Professor Liz Pellicano, Centre for Research on Autism and Education (CRAE)

### **Witnesses:**

Alicia McColl, Parent

Tamsin Green, Parent

Dame Christine Lenehan,  
Director, Council for Disabled Children

Tania Tirraoro, Parent,  
Director of Special Needs Jungle

Eleanor Wright, SOS!SEN

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The APPGA would like to thank all witnesses and the organisations they represent, and everyone who took the time to share their views and experiences.

We are grateful to Axcis Education for their generous and unrestricted sponsorship of this inquiry.

We would also like to thank Ambitious about Autism, Professor Liz Pellicano, and the policy and research teams at The National Autistic Society.





**The National Autistic Society** is the UK's leading autism charity.

Since we began over 50 years ago, we have been pioneering new ways to support people and understand autism. We continue to learn every day from the children and adults we support in our schools and care services.

Based on our experience, and with support from our members, donors and volunteers, we provide life-changing information and advice to millions of autistic people, their families and friends. And we support professionals, politicians and the public to understand autism better so that more autistic people of all ages can be understood, supported and appreciated for who they are.

Until everyone understands.

[www.autism.org.uk](http://www.autism.org.uk)

**Ambitious about Autism** is the national charity for children and young people with autism. We provide services, raise awareness and understanding, and campaign for change.

Through TreeHouse School, The Rise School and Ambitious College we offer specialist education and support. Our ambition is to make the ordinary possible for more children and young people with autism.

[www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk](http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk)

**The Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE)** is a partnership between UCL Institute of Education, the leading centre for education and social research in the UK, and Ambitious about Autism, the national charity for autistic children and young people.

CRAE conduct groundbreaking scientific research to enhance knowledge about interventions, education and outcomes for autistic children, young people and adults; ensuring this knowledge is effectively translated so that it can make a real difference to people's everyday lives.

CRAE also work with the autism community (including autistic people, their families, and the professionals who work with them) to promote awareness, and acceptance, of autism. The Centre is generously supported by funding from the Pears Foundation.

[crae.ioe.ac.uk](http://crae.ioe.ac.uk)

**The All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA)** is a formal cross-party backbench group of MPs and Peers who share an interest in autism. It was set up in February 2000. Its role is to campaign in Parliament for greater awareness of autism, and to lobby the Government for improved services for people on the autism spectrum and their carers.

The APPGA does not have any powers to introduce legislation, nor is it part of Government. But it provides a useful platform for important and topical issues around autism to be discussed and raised in Parliament.

**Officers:**

Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP (Chair)	Christina Rees MP
Jonathan Reynolds MP (Vice-Chair)	Jim Shannon MP
Lord Touhig (Vice-Chair)	Cat Smith MP
Maria Caulfield MP	Baroness Hollins
Thangam Debbonaire MP	Baroness Uddin
Justin Madders MP	Lord Warner
Huw Merriman MP	



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