

Family Voice Surrey: Collective Themes and Summary of Parent Carer Feedback on the SEND White Paper Proposals



Family Voice Surrey, the Department for Education (DfE) recognised Parent Carer Forum for Surrey representing over 3000 parent carer members, gathered feedback through a consultation meeting, Zoom chat discussion and Microsoft Forms survey to understand parent carer views on the SEND White Paper proposals. This summary reflects the collective themes, experiences and concerns raised by families and is anonymised to represent the shared views of parent carers across Surrey.

Executive Summary

The overwhelming sentiment from families was one of significant concern, anxiety and distrust regarding the proposed reforms. While some parent carers acknowledged the stated intentions of improving inclusion and creating a more joined-up system, most respondents felt the proposals lacked clarity, realism and sufficient safeguards for children and young people with SEND.

Many families described fears that the reforms would:

- weaken legal protections and tribunal rights,
- reduce access to specialist provision,
- make support less individualised,
- place additional pressure on already overstretched schools and services,
- prioritise financial savings over children's needs.

It was felt that the suggested budget within the proposals is insufficient and unrealistic to achieve the aims.

Several parents expressed feelings of devastation, panic and uncertainty about the future support available to their children.

Themes Identified

Positive Intentions but Lack of Confidence in Delivery

Parent carers recognised some positive ambitions within the proposals, particularly:

- improving joined-up working across education, health and care,
- creating greater consistency across local authorities,
- improving early identification,
- increased access to specialist expertise within mainstream schools.

However, families consistently questioned whether these ambitions were achievable in practice due to:

- insufficient funding,
- workforce shortages,
- lack of operational detail,
- current pressures across the SEND system.

Many parents felt the reforms described an aspirational vision without explaining how it could realistically be delivered.

Significant Concern About Loss of Legal Rights and Accountability

The strongest and most consistent theme across all feedback was concern about the potential reduction of legal rights and enforceable protections for children with SEND. Especially in respect of the tribunal changes.

Families raised concerns about:

- fewer children qualifying for EHCPs,
- the replacement of detailed, legally enforceable EHCP provision with less enforceable Individual Support Plans (ISPs),
- reduced access to SEND tribunals,
- weaker routes for challenge and appeal,
- a perceived shift in accountability away from local authorities.

Parents repeatedly stated that legal protections and tribunal processes are currently the only reliable mechanisms many families have to secure appropriate support for their children.

There was widespread concern that:

- support may be agreed but not delivered,
- parents may lose meaningful routes to challenge decisions,
- children could be left without effective safeguards if provision is inadequate.

Many respondents viewed this as a fundamental weakening of children's rights.

Concerns About a Move Away from Individualised, Needs-Led Support

A major concern was the proposed move toward:

- standardised support packages,
- categorisation of need,
- predetermined pathways of provision.

Families consistently emphasised that SEND children have highly individual and often complex needs that do not fit neatly into broad categories.

Parents feared:

- children would be expected to fit systems rather than systems adapting to children,
- complex or overlapping needs would be overlooked,
- provision would become driven by thresholds and categories rather than holistic assessment.

There was strong concern that a package-led system would reduce flexibility and fail to meet individual children's needs appropriately.

Concerns About Mainstream Inclusion and Reduced Access to Specialist Provision

Many parent carers were concerned that the reforms assume mainstream settings can meet the needs of most children with SEND.

Families highlighted that:

- inclusion is not simply physical placement in mainstream schools,

- some children require specialist environments to access education safely and successfully,
- sensory, emotional and communication needs are not always manageable within large mainstream environments.

Particular concerns were raised about:

- children with autism and sensory needs,
- low arousal environments,
- overcrowded secondary schools,
- children experiencing anxiety, trauma and school avoidance.

Many parents feared:

- increasing pressure to keep children in mainstream settings,
- reduced access to specialist schools,
- possible long-term decline or closure of specialist provision.

Several parents shared examples of children only thriving once they accessed specialist placements after years of distress within mainstream settings.

Workforce Capacity and Funding Concerns

There was widespread concern about whether the workforce and funding exist to implement the reforms safely and effectively.

Parents repeatedly questioned:

- where additional Educational Psychologists (EPs), Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs), Occupational Therapists (OTs), CAMHS staff and specialist teachers would come from,
- how schools would realistically access specialist support.

Families highlighted existing:

- long waiting lists,
- difficulties accessing assessments,
- staffing shortages,
- pressures on SENCOs and teaching staff.

Concerns included:

- concerns over the “Experts at Hand” being an advisory initiative as opposed to directly supporting children and young people.
- therapy being delivered by non-specialists rather than qualified clinicians,
- increased stress and burnout for school staff,
- mainstream schools being expected to manage needs beyond their capacity.
- what adequate training will look like and how will it be refreshed and monitored.

Many respondents felt the reforms place additional responsibility on schools without adequate funding or infrastructure.

Lack of Clarity and Missing Detail

A recurring theme was the lack of detail throughout the White Paper.

Families stated that key areas remain unclear, including:

- how ISPs would operate in practice,
- how accountability would work,
- how complaints and appeals processes would function,
- how transitions between support levels would happen,
- how support would be funded and delivered consistently.

Parent carers also highlighted missing detail regarding:

- EOTAS (Education Other Than At School),
- Alternative provision,
- nurseries and early years,
- post-16 settings and supported internships,
- children with highly complex needs,
- definitions of “complex needs”,

Many respondents felt the consultation raised more questions than answers. With great concerns expressed around schools holding responsibility as opposed to the Local Authority and worry about escalation routes and legal rights.

Concerns About the Consultation Process

A number of parent carers expressed dissatisfaction with the consultation process itself.

Concerns included:

- lack of transparency,
- insufficient engagement with families,
- unrealistic consultation timescales,
- overly complex consultation questions,
- perceptions that key decisions had already been made before consultation began. For example, the changes to tribunals were not included in the consultation questions, which leaves parents with no opportunity to feedback back and makes them feel like this is a done deal.

Some families felt:

- parent and young person voices were not genuinely reflected in the proposals,
- the consultation process was not accessible for families already under significant stress.

There was also concern that parents currently in crisis or “survival mode” may be unable to engage fully with consultation activity despite being most affected.

Impact on Families and Emotional Wellbeing

Many responses reflected the emotional toll the proposals are having on families.

Parents described:

- fear,
- uncertainty,
- exhaustion,
- anxiety about the future.

Several respondents spoke about:

- fighting for years to secure appropriate support.

- Significant concerns over the transition periods for children and potential loss of rights at every stage.
- concerns about losing placements that are currently working well,
- fears that future generations of children may not be able to access the same support.

Families expressed concern that:

- children may experience increased distress,
- educational breakdown,
- school trauma,
- worsening mental health if provision becomes less responsive or specialist support becomes harder to access.

Conclusion

Across all feedback sources, several consistent messages emerged:

- Families support the principle of improving inclusion, early intervention and joined-up working.
- However, parent carers do not believe the current proposals provide sufficient safeguards, clarity or resourcing to achieve these aims safely.
- The strongest concerns relate to the reduction of legal protections, accountability and individualised support.
- Families fear the reforms may lead to reduced access to specialist provision and poorer outcomes for children with SEND.
- Parent carers want meaningful co-production, transparent consultation and reforms that are genuinely centred on children's individual needs rather than financial pressures or standardised systems.

Recommendations

1 - Retain and strengthen legal protections and accountability for children and young people with SEND

Families consistently highlighted the importance of maintaining legally enforceable support, clear accountability mechanisms and meaningful routes of challenge and appeal, including access to SEND tribunals. Any reforms should ensure that children's rights and safeguards are not weakened.

2- Ensure reforms are properly funded and resourced before implementation

Parent carers raised significant concerns regarding workforce shortages, long waiting lists and pressures on schools and services. Reforms should only proceed with sufficient investment in specialist provision, training and qualified professionals, including Educational Psychologists, therapists and specialist teaching staff.

3 - Maintain a genuinely individualised, needs-led approach to SEND support

Families emphasised that children and young people with SEND have diverse and complex needs that cannot be effectively addressed through standardised packages or broad categories of provision. Reforms should preserve flexibility, specialist provision and personalised support based on holistic assessment of individual need.