

SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan: What SENCOs need to know

‘Our ambition is to create a society that celebrates, encourages, and enables the success of all children and young people, including those with SEND and in alternative provision. A society where we hold high aspirations for all children and young people, recognising that although success looks different for everyone, it is no less worthy of celebration.’ *SEND and AP Improvement Plan, 2023*, p.22

With this Improvement Plan, the DfE seem to have listened to the concerns of parents, young people and professionals in that there is a need to streamline and equalise the system so that it is easier for everyone to navigate, leads to better outcomes for children and young people and is financially sustainable.

To support SENCOs, we have extracted the key changes which are most relevant; this is not intended to be a full overview of the Implementation Plan and if you wish to find out more detail, then we recommend that you refer to the Plan itself as well.

- A SENCO NPQ will be introduced which will be mandatory for those who do not hold the NASENCO (including those who became a SENCO before 2009), and the timeframe requirement will be ‘strengthened’ (there are no further details currently on timescales). It’s likely that this training will be based on the aspects of provision which will be expected through the national standards, and a plan for how to raise and maintain the confidence and capability for this, for all teachers.
- The formation of a set of evidence-based SEND and AP National Standards (from 2025) will establish what support should be ordinarily available in mainstream settings, and for those receiving SEN Support and with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHC Plans). SENCOs will need to ensure that their settings meet these requirements – many of you will already do so, and the standardisation of these may make it easier for you to implement improvements to practice towards which you have long been working.
- The National Standards will also clarify who is responsible for delivering provision and from which budgets. This should result in the financial responsibility for SEND being shared more fairly across education, health and social care.
- The intention is that the National Standards will improve provision for those receiving SEN Support, resulting in reduced need for EHC Plans and/or access to specialist provision, so that those whose needs are greatest are able to access the education they need; we will have to wait to see if this is in fact the case.

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- The National Standards will be supported by SEND and AP ‘practice guides’ for frontline professionals from the end of 2025, targeting the most prevalent needs (SLCN, autism, SEMH).
- The National Standards will be a basis for developing a national approach to funding bands and tariffs. This is likely to result in increased funding in some areas and possibly decreases in others but will lead to greater equity between local areas; national funding bands and tariffs will be included in the response to the consultation on schools’ National Funding Formula in 2023. The intention of standardisation is not to remove individual decision making; need should still drive provision and a nationalised approach is only to inform funding.
- The notional SEND budget is also being considered in the light of the National Funding Formula, with more detail to come later this year. It is notable that there is no mention of it becoming ring-fenced though.
- SEN Information Report content expectations will be reviewed to consider if transparency can be improved. There is no further detail on this currently.
- There will be an amended Code of Practice – this will not be implemented until it has been consulted on so is unlikely to happen for some time, and it is likely to reflect the changes detailed in the Improvement Plan rather than add more.
- EHC Plans are to be standardised nationally from 2025, with increasing use of digital technology. This will ease the bureaucracy that many SENCOs face when working across LAs and should make the whole process less stressful for everyone once established. However, it is notable that LAs will be ‘encouraged’ to adopt the standard template, rather than mandated, at least initially.
- New specialist (free) schools are to be established. These are the same schools which you may have heard about last year, as the application process was launched in June 2022 – there is no information in the Plan on where or what type of schools these will be.
- A three-tier AP system will be created: targeted early support in mainstream schools, time-limited intensive placements in AP and longer term placements to support return to mainstream or 16+ destinations.
- Local areas are to create evidence-based ‘local inclusion plans’ which will detail how needs will be met, in line with the National Standards. Local and national inclusion dashboards will sit alongside these, to improve transparency. A national dashboard will be publicly available in Autumn 2023.

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- Early Language and Support for Every Child (ELSEC) pathfinders will be launched with NHS England to improve access to speech and language therapy. 'Pathfinders' means that this will be piloted in 9 Integrated Care Board areas.
- A longer-term approach to ensuring the impact of teaching assistants will be developed, starting with a research project to develop the evidence base (it being 13 years since Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants was published). Effective TA deployment will also form part of the new 'practice guides'.
- Transition guidance will be published for all stages, most particularly including into post-16 destinations and employment. Higher Education is brought into this Improvement Plan, which is a welcome development; this is in regard to the Disabled Students Allowance, and does not mean that the statutory SEND system should extend to HE though.
- There are no changes to exams and qualifications, apart from National Standards for Personal, Social and Employability Skills Qualifications being developed.
- Apprenticeship providers will be offered professional development to support them to meet the needs of all apprentices.
- The ITT Core Content Framework and Early Career Framework will be reviewed to consider how they can better develop the confidence of teachers to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. Guidance on the involvement of specialist schools in ITT will be developed.
- The Universal SEND Services programme, led by nasen with the Education and Training Foundation and the Autism Education Trust, will continue to provide funded support to the workforce until March 2025. More information on the programme can be found here: <https://www.wholeschoosend.org.uk/page/universal-send-services>.
- nasen also offers funded support for Assistive Technology for schools. Find out more here: <https://www.nasen.org.uk/assistive-technology>.
- You can read the SEND and AP Improvement Plan in full here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-and-alternative-provision-improvement-plan>.