

Briefing Paper: Schools White Paper 2026 - SEND Reform

Newcastle Safeguarding Children Partnership (NSCP)

Date: March 2026

Audience: Statutory and relevant safeguarding partners across education, local authority services, health, police, voluntary and community sector

Purpose of this Briefing

This briefing provides safeguarding partners with a high-level overview of the Schools White Paper 2026 and its proposals for reforming support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It highlights what partners need to understand now, ahead of future legislative change and consultation responses.

Context and Rationale

The government published the [Schools White Paper Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#) in February 2026, alongside a [national consultation on SEND reform](#). The proposals respond to longstanding pressures in the SEND system, including rising numbers of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), financial strain on local authorities, and concerns about inconsistent early support for children and families.

The white paper aims to contribute to the government's reform programme aims "create a safer and higher-quality education system" and "drive high and rising standards for every child."

The reforms aim to move the system towards earlier intervention, stronger inclusion in mainstream settings, and clearer shared responsibility across education, health and care. Legislative change is required and is not expected to take effect until September 2029. Until then, current statutory arrangements remain in place..

What This Means in Practice

In the short term:

- There are no immediate changes to statutory safeguarding duties or EHCP entitlements.
- Existing SEND and safeguarding arrangements continue to apply.
- Partners may see increased engagement activity linked to the national SEND consultation (open until May 2026).

Over time, the proposals signal:

- A stronger emphasis on early help and inclusion, with more needs met before escalation.

- Greater expectation that mainstream settings, supported by partners, can meet a wider range of needs.
- Clearer national frameworks for support, replacing some local variation.

Key Messages for Partners

- Children's rights remain central: EHCPs will continue for children with the most complex needs, with no changes before at least 2030.
- Earlier support is a priority: The reforms aim to reduce delay and prevent needs escalating through earlier, joined-up intervention.
- Partnership working is critical: Education, health, social care and safeguarding partners are expected to work more closely around children and families.
- Change will be phased: The current system remains in place for several years, allowing time to prepare safely and proportionately.
- Consultation matters: [Partner feedback](#) will influence how reforms are shaped and implemented.

Safeguarding / Quality Impact

The proposals have important implications for safeguarding and quality of practice:

- Effective implementation of earlier identification and support is critical to reduce risk and escalation for vulnerable children.
- Clearer roles and national standards will aim to improve consistency and accountability across agencies.
- There are [sector concerns](#) about unintended impacts on access to support and enforceable rights, which partners should remain alert to.
- Strong safeguarding oversight will be essential as new systems and thresholds are developed.

Engagement and Next Steps

Safeguarding partners are encouraged to:

- Familiarise themselves with the direction of travel set out in the White Paper.
- Engage with local education and SEND leads to understand local implications and planning.
- Consider contributing to the national SEND consultation where appropriate.
- Maintain a focus on children's lived experience, ensuring safeguarding principles remain embedded as reforms progress..

Further updates will be made as consultation outcomes, legislation and implementation plans become clearer.

Appendix: Sector concerns about access to support and enforceable rights

Alongside the intended benefits of earlier help and greater inclusion, a range of sector bodies have raised concerns about how the proposed reforms could affect children's access to support and the strength of enforceable rights, particularly during transition.

Key areas of concern include:

- **Thresholds for statutory protection**

The proposals would introduce new tiers of support below Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), supported by Individual Support Plans. While intended to widen access to help, some organisations have expressed concern that children may receive support without the same level of legal enforceability or routes of challenge currently attached to EHCPs.

- **Parental and young person rights**

Sector responses highlight uncertainty about how far parents and young people will be able to influence, challenge or appeal decisions about support where provision is set out in non-EHCP plans. There is concern that families may feel less able to contest decisions if rights and processes are less clearly defined.

- **Consistency and accountability**

Although national standards are proposed, there are concerns that differences in local interpretation or capacity could lead to uneven access to support, particularly in the early years of implementation. This could affect vulnerable children if safeguards are not applied consistently.

- **Risk during system transition**

The reforms will be phased over several years. Sector bodies have cautioned that periods of change can increase the risk of children falling between systems, especially where responsibilities shift between education, health and care partners.

- **Impact on the most vulnerable children**

Particular concern has been expressed about children with complex needs, children in care, and those already known to safeguarding services. If access to specialist support becomes more tightly defined, strong multi-agency oversight will be essential to ensure that need, not system design, drives decision-making.

For safeguarding partners, these concerns underline the importance of:

- Maintaining a clear focus on children's lived experience and outcomes.
- Ensuring that safeguarding thresholds and duties are not weakened or obscured by new education support arrangements.
- Remaining alert to unintended consequences as reforms develop, particularly for children who rely on statutory protection to secure support.