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1. Introduction

With the publication of the *Schools White Paper 2026: Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, and the Government consultation on SEND reform *Putting Children and Young People First*, it is clear that change is once again coming to the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) sector.

As the implications for children and young people with sensory impairment are beginning to emerge, NatSIP hosted a sector discussion for NatSIP partners and members. Attended by approximately 70 delegates, the event hosted speakers from the Department for Education and from across the sector, each of whom reflected for their own organisations on the proposals in the Schools White Paper and gave feedback from their own events.

Speakers and presenters included:

Janet Collins	Department for Education
Brian Lamb	NatSIP Policy Advisor
Alex Clarke	Guide Dogs
Justin Cooke	National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)
Jane Sharp	RNIB and VIEW
Lucy Merrett	Thomas Pocklington Trust
Teresa Quail	British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD)

Delegates and NatSIP colleagues additionally shared their key messages for responding to the SEND consultation and discussed how the interpretation of the government proposals might influence future educational provision for learners with sensory impairment.

The following is a summary of responses during the event, from the event 'chat', Q+A and speakers. It is organised into key areas of the proposed reforms.

2. Experts at Hand

The SI sector welcomes the concept and intention of Experts at Hand (EAH), although concerns were expressed about how this is currently presented and positioned and how it might operate.

Importantly, SI specialist teachers are specifically mentioned in the consultation as an example of EAH, but there is no obvious thinking in any of the subsequent guidance about how the training and development of these specialist teachers might be achieved to meet the objectives of the EAH Service. This is in contrast with educational psychologist and speech and language therapist development, where specific work plans are given.

There is potential confusion about funding mechanisms. Some sections of the consultation state an expectation that school clusters will fund specialist teachers (see the chart and commentary on page 93). At other points, the consultation states the intention to move funding away from the Local Authority (LA) over time. Colleagues shared that there are already examples of LAs beginning to develop and implement different solutions for provision.

The consultation paper indicates that the EAH service will continue to be funded via the local authority (LA) route of centralised commissioning and provision, and so has left to LAs to determine and host SI services, or at least commission them, in that capacity directly. However, the development of school clusters and the use of the Inclusion funding starts to point towards a different model. Even if funding is retained centrally by LAs (NatSIP's preferred funding model) it is not clear if there will be capacity to expand SI services sufficiently to meet the requirement for EAH, given the focus on other specialist areas.

NatSIP would like to see clarification in the forthcoming guidance on how the funding is intended to work, for the sensory impairment professional workforce and the development of an accompanying national workforce strategy, mirroring that for EPs and SLTs. For SI learners there is a statutory requirement to use specialist teachers with a mandatory Qualified Teacher of Sensory Impairment qualification.

3. Inclusion Bases

Under the proposed new system, most current SI Resource Bases would meet the criteria to become Support Bases. The additional funding and focus on bases was welcomed by participants during the event.

It was stressed that support bases play a crucial role in the continuum of provision across the SI sector. As an example, at primary school level, 26% of children with hearing impairment (HI) and an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are placed in resource bases. Proportionally, this is far greater than for other SEN categories, with 14% at secondary level.

These provisions are very popular with parents, and some SI services are also based in them, but the number of bases has shrunk over recent years from 260 for HI in 2016 to 215 in 2026. Provision is also geographically inconsistent. In order to ensure that provision can be extended, there is a real need for a strategy of specialist workforce development with an increasing number of teachers holding one of the mandatory qualifications. (MQTSI). As described above, this is not necessarily included in the proposed funding model.

Without a specialist workforce development strategy, it is unclear how support bases might develop to increase the level of available provision to meet the needs of an increasing population of children with SI.

The DfE's aim to move away from special school provision and embed more resources in mainstream settings might not be deliverable without such SI strategic planning.

The intention of the reforms to encourage schools to operate together as 'clusters', so that SEND support can be provided across several schools, and across the range of needs, without recourse to EHCPs, is already in place in some areas, where SI bases staffed by specialists already provide expertise and support to other schools in the area.

4. Reasonable Adjustments

The focus on the Equality Act duties, and specifically on reasonable adjustments, was welcomed. The concept of settings making reasonable adjustments is central to good and effective practice in SI.

There was, however, concern that the guidance is only a reworked version of the current Equality and Human Rights Commission Technical Guidance. The DfE will be aware that this technical guidance does not carry the same weight as statutory guidance.

Given that the SEN Code of Practice is going to need to be revised and the Equality Act is clear about obligations for service providers, it is not clear why the guidance on Equality Act duties would not be directly included in revised statutory guidance. This would support the DfE's aims to give more security of provision without recourse to EHCPs, and simply reflect what is already in legislation. NatSIP delegates were also generally supportive of the intention to work within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD),

5. Funding and co-ordination of early years support

Specialist teachers provide essential support to families from the very early diagnosis of SI, often within the first weeks of life. They provide ongoing support through the early years, including language acquisition, technical support and understanding around hearing aids and cochlear implants, vision technology, habilitation needs and intervenor programmes. It is not clear how that very early 0-2yrs funding is maintained in funding models that look to transfer more funding to schools.

There also needs to be close coordination with Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) around this specialist early years provision. For example, the NHS are currently reviewing and recasting the newborn hearing screening pathway and follow-up services. There is concern that deaf children who are not identified by the newborn hearing screening service need to be picked up, but there is no obvious way that planning for this is being integrated with the current reforms. Neither does this work fit within the model of family hubs. NatSIP's preference is that this should continue to be funded and managed through LAs, with the system centred on the contribution being made by specialist services, with appropriate quality assurance measures put in place, so that children have access to appropriate early intervention, and then later integration into education services.

6. Packages of Support

NatSIP has already been engaged in some discussions with the DfE about how this could work for SI. Currently DfE are considering a proposal from NatSIP to begin the development of the specialist SI-related package. In principle, NatSIP supports the concept of early assessment and intervention for children through packages of support.

There needs to be a balance between the overall development of standard packages, and ensuring that support can be tailored to reflect specific individual needs and personalised reasonable adjustments. Many NatSIP delegates shared concerns about the potential limitations on parental choice of schools or other settings and in the revised EHCP proposals.

7. Definitions

Great concern was expressed about the apparent confusion between Sensory issues (such as Sensory Processing and Sensory Integration) in SEND and Sensory Impairment. These are distinctly different. The guidance will need to be very clear and unambiguous to avoid such confusion in implementation.

8. Individual Support Plans (ISPs)

Being more specific about children's needs and being able to demonstrate the provision being made to parents in an ISP is very welcome. Schools should be keeping records for interventions and needs under the current legislation. ISPs will extend this duty. However, there is concern that, if ISPs are not implemented simply and consistently, they will add to the case load work and pressures on an already overloaded specialist service, and on teachers more generally. The work of specialist teacher and specialist support professional goes across the whole of the continuum of support for SI pupils from integration in a mainstream environment to targeted, targeted plus and specialist provision.

9. Provisional Qualifications and Specialism

There is a very strong feeling that the legal requirement for the specialism need to be retained. The reassurances that the mandatory qualification was being retained were welcomed.

There is a need for wider nationally recognised continued professional development routes for the contributing specialists who are essential to the successful outcomes of all SI learners.

It is also important to recognise and acknowledge the very specific specialist practice outlined in the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment (CFVI) and Specialist Deaf Curriculum Framework (SDCF). This needs to be included within the guidance to be published for Inclusion Bases, Experts at Hand and more generally.