

Summary of Feedback on Southampton's Draft SEND Reform Plan

The feedback shared by families and professionals highlighted a strong desire for a more inclusive, transparent and genuinely co-produced SEND system. While many welcomed the direction and language within the draft plan, there were also clear concerns around how the proposals would work in practice and whether sufficient accountability, staffing and resources would be in place to deliver meaningful change.

What Families and Professionals Valued

Participants welcomed:

- A stronger focus on co-production, lived experience and involving families and young people in shaping services.
- Recognition that the voices of children and young people themselves must be heard more meaningfully, with many feeling this still needs significant improvement.
- The emphasis on early identification and early intervention, rather than support arriving years later.
- Recognition that SEND support should be everyone's responsibility, not just specialist SEND teams.
- A vision of children and young people being treated as individuals with unique strengths and needs, rather than being placed into "one-size-fits-all" systems.
- The ambition for children and young people to feel:
 - Included
 - Recognised
 - Supported
 - Less isolated
 - Able to thrive within the right environment

Families also valued:

- Stronger joined-up working and relationships between education, health and social care services.
- Developing a more skilled, knowledgeable and confident SEND workforce.
- Support being available earlier from local knowledgeable experts who understand children's needs before difficulties escalate.
- Reducing reliance on costly out-of-area placements by investing in sustainable local support.

- Reducing reliance on costly out-of-area placements by investing in sustainable local support.
- Improving inclusion and accessibility across all schools and services, including for physically disabled children and wheelchair users.
- The principle that children should be included within mainstream education where this is the right setting for the child and their family.

Many participants highlighted that, in an ideal world, schools would have greater staffing, training and capacity to support children and young people effectively within their local communities.

Concerns Raised

A repeated theme was that the draft felt:

- Positive and aspirational,
- But lacking enough detail about how changes would work in practice.

Families repeatedly asked:

- What will this actually look like day-to-day?
- How will schools and services be held accountable?
- What happens if support is not delivered?

There was a strong message that schools need to be held more accountable for:

- Identifying needs early,
- Responding appropriately,
- Implementing support quickly,
- And working openly and collaboratively with families.

Families wanted significantly more detail around:

- How schools will be monitored and held to account,
- What training school staff will receive,
- What level of SEND expertise will be expected within schools,
- And how consistency across settings will be achieved.

Concerns were also raised about:

- Workforce capacity and staffing levels within mainstream schools.
- Whether schools currently have enough specialist knowledge and resources to deliver meaningful inclusion.
- EHCP assessment access potentially becoming harder.

- The lack of clarity around what “fair access” to services such as Experts at Hand would actually mean in practice.

Families questioned:

- Would access be determined by the number of children within a school?
- The number of pupils with SEND?
- Overall school size?
- Level of need within a setting?
- Or another threshold entirely?

Participants wanted much greater transparency around how support and resources would be allocated fairly.

EBSA and Real Lived Experience

A strong theme throughout the feedback was concern that attendance data alone does not reflect the realities experienced by many families, particularly those experiencing EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance).

Families stressed that:

- Attendance figures do not show the emotional distress behind school attendance,
- Data alone cannot reflect trauma, anxiety, burnout or masking,
- And decision-making must be informed by real lived experiences, not solely statistics.

Several families specifically questioned:

- Where EBSA sits within the reform proposals,
- How schools will be supported to understand EBSA,
- And what practical changes families would actually see.

There was also a call for:

- Open, honest and transparent relationships between schools and families,
- Schools being willing to acknowledge difficulties and mistakes,
- And professionals working alongside families rather than positioning themselves as the sole experts.

What Families Want Moving Forward

Families said they would like:

- Clearer communication about how they can get involved,
- Physical information and simple explanations of how systems work now, compared to proposed future changes,
- More regular updates and opportunities for feedback,
- More face-to-face engagement opportunities rather than only surveys or “tick-box” exercises,
- Stronger partnership working through Parent Carer Forums,
- And reassurance that feedback will genuinely influence the final plan.

Families also wanted:

- Better governance and accountability,
- More transparency around decision-making,
- Clearer support pathways,
- More specialist knowledge within mainstream settings,
- And stronger joined-up working across services.

What Success Would Look Like for Families

Participants said that if the reforms were working well, families would notice:

- Less stress and burnout,
- Feeling listened to and supported,
- Happier children and young people,
- Better experiences with schools and services,
- Clearer support pathways,
- Improved home, school and social life,
- Greater trust in the SEND system,
- And more opportunities for children and young people to reach their full potential.

Overall, the feedback reflected cautious optimism alongside a strong message that families want reforms to lead to genuine cultural and practical change – not simply new language or systems.