

# **SOUTHAMPTON PARENT CARER FORUM**



**SEND REFORMS ENGAGEMENT  
REPORT - FAMILY VOICE,  
WORKSHOP FEEDBACK AND  
KEY THEMES 2026**

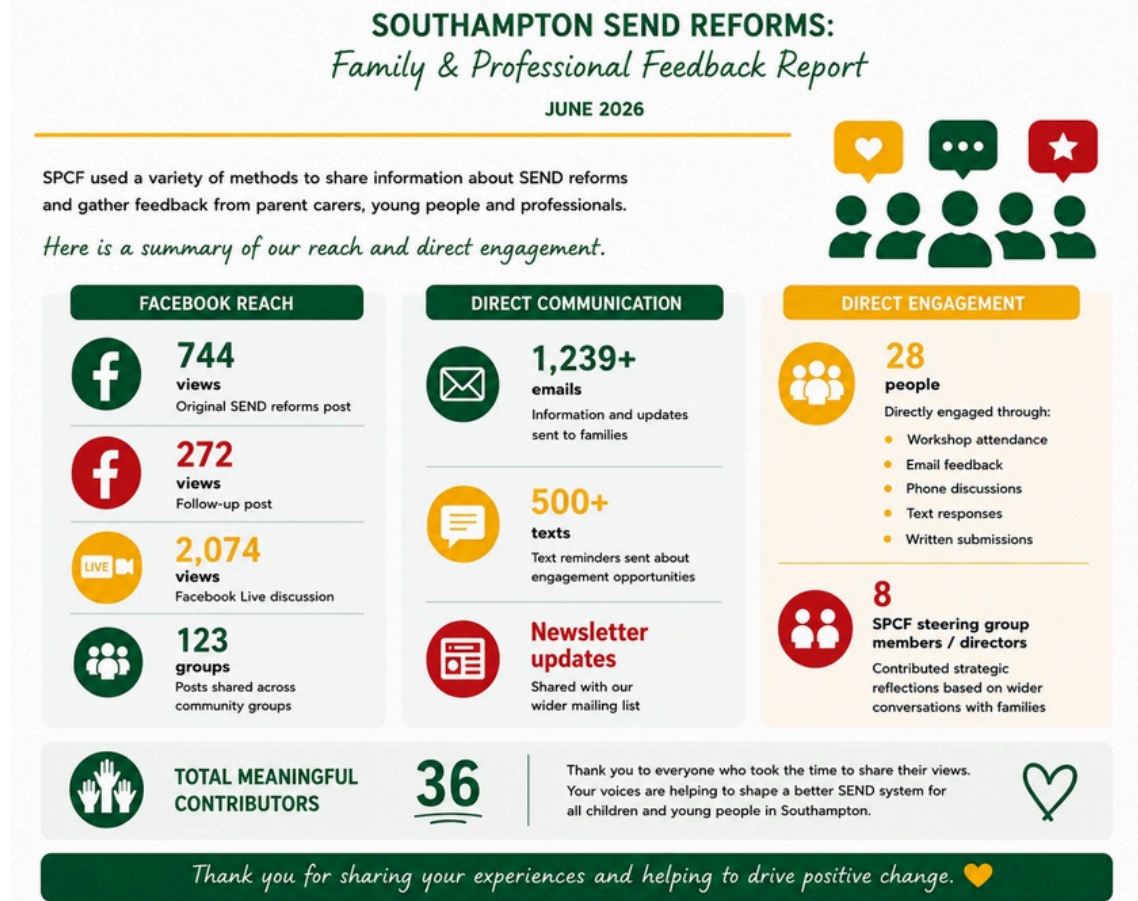
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Southampton Parent Carer Forum (SPCF) undertook significant engagement activity to ensure parent carers and families had opportunities to understand, discuss, and influence the local SEND reforms.

Our aim was not simply to share information, but to create meaningful opportunities for families to shape the conversation and ensure lived experience informed local planning.

Engagement included:

- Dedicated SEND reform information hub on the SPCF website
- Summary graphics explaining the reforms in accessible language
- Social media awareness campaign
- Facebook Live discussion session
- Workshop with families and professionals
- Informal conversations at coffee mornings. SEND events. and direct parent contact



A consistent message emerged:

“Families want reform – but only if it leads to real, practical change they can see and feel.”

Families broadly welcomed the ambition of the reforms but expressed concern about whether plans would translate into meaningful improvements on the ground.

# METHODOLOGY

SPCF used a mixed-method engagement approach to ensure a broad range of voices were captured.

## Engagement methods included:

### Online engagement

- SEND reform webpage
- Social media posts
- Facebook comments
- Email feedback
- Text message feedback
- Facebook Live Q&A

### Face-to-face engagement

- Dedicated reform workshop
- SEND get togethers
- Coffee mornings
- One-to-one conversations
- Existing forum events

### Inclusive engagement

SPCF recognises some families do not engage through traditional consultation routes. We therefore proactively gathered feedback from:

- Families already known to the forum
- Seldom-heard communities
- Families awaiting diagnosis
- Families without EHCPs
- Families with complex needs
- Families of children with physical disabilities
- Families experiencing EBSA

This approach ensured feedback reflected both strategic and lived experience perspectives.

# OVERALL FAMILY RESPONSE

Families were generally positive about the intention behind the reforms.

They welcomed:

- Greater emphasis on early identification
- Workforce development
- Better joined-up working
- Co-production
- More local support
- Reducing reliance on out-of-area placements

**The plan looks positive and ambitious, but families need clearer detail about how this will work in practice.**

However, optimism was cautious.

A repeated concern was that the plan felt ambitious but lacked sufficient operational detail.

Many parents said they have heard similar promises before.

Trust remains fragile.

Families repeatedly asked:

- What will actually change?
- How will this improve day-to-day life?
- Who will be accountable?
- How will families know things are improving?

# KEY THEMES FROM FAMILIES

## **Theme 1: Co-production must be real, not tokenistic**

Families strongly supported the inclusion of co-production within the plan.

Parents want to be involved in:

- Service design
- Local offer development
- Decision making
- Implementation
- Evaluation

**Feedback needs to actually be taken on board and implemented in the final plan**

They want co-production to move beyond consultation and become embedded throughout the system.

Families particularly stressed the importance of hearing directly from young people.

SPCF also heard that families need clearer routes into participation.

Parents want to understand:

- Who leads each workstream
- How they can contribute
- When opportunities to influence decisions arise

**Especially include the voices of young people**

## **Theme 2: Trust must be rebuilt**

This was one of the strongest themes across all engagement.

Families described years of frustration, inconsistency, and feeling unheard.

Trust cannot be restored through documents alone.

It will require:

- honesty
- transparency
- communication
- accountability
- relationship-building

**We need open, honest and transparent relationships.**

Parents said professionals must be willing to acknowledge mistakes.

Families want genuine partnership. They want lived experience respected as expertise.

## **Theme 3: Earlier identification and earlier support**

Families strongly welcomed the focus on early identification.

However, many said early identification currently happens far too late.

Support often arrives only after:

- crisis
- exclusion risk
- mental health deterioration
- family burnout

Parents want systems that identify needs earlier and respond faster.

Families described a need for support in every setting and at every stage.

This includes:

- early years
- schools
- health
- community settings

#### **Theme 4: EBSA must be explicitly recognised**

A major gap identified by families was limited visibility of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) within the reform plans.

Parents raised concerns that attendance data alone can hide serious distress.

Families explained that children experiencing severe anxiety may appear in data systems as attendance concerns rather than children in distress.

Families want EBSA clearly recognised within:

- identification processes
- intervention pathways
- accountability frameworks
- workforce training

**How is EBSA reflected in these plans?**

SPCF believes EBSA must be more explicitly referenced within local implementation.

#### **Theme 5: Workforce capacity is a major concern**

Families welcomed the focus on workforce development.

However, many questioned whether services have sufficient staffing capacity to deliver the vision.

Concerns included:

- stretched SENCOs
- limited specialist teams
- school staffing shortages
- insufficient training
- inconsistent SEND knowledge

**Our school has one SENCO for over 600 children. She just doesn't have the time**

Families emphasised that reform cannot succeed without sufficient skilled staff.

Parents want:

- confident staff
- knowledgeable staff
- well-trained staff
- accessible specialists

#### **Theme 6: Schools need stronger accountability**

Families repeatedly asked how schools will be held accountable for inclusion and early support.

Key concerns included:

- delayed identification
- inconsistent practice
- lack of reasonable adjustments
- variable inclusion across schools

**Schools need to recognise need and respond properly**

Families want clearer accountability measures around:

- inclusive practice
- quality of ordinarily available provision
- timely intervention
- communication with families

They want assurance that good practice is expected in every school, not dependent on postcode or leadership.

### **Theme 7: Inclusion must remain meaningful**

Families supported inclusion where appropriate.

However, they emphasised that inclusion must mean more than placement in mainstream.

True inclusion requires:

- belonging
- support
- adjustments
- understanding
- safety

One parent shared:

“A child should be recognised as an individual with their own personal needs.”

Another said:

“Not to be treated like another book in a library, when every book is unique.”


Families emphasised that mainstream placement is only successful when meaningful support exists.

### **Theme 8: Reforms must include physical disabilities and complex needs**

Families highlighted concerns that SEND conversations can become overly focused on neurodiversity.

Parents stressed the need for reforms to remain inclusive of:

- physical disabilities
- wheelchair users
- medical needs
- sensory impairments
- complex physical presentations



**Don't forget  
accessibility for  
all**

Families want:

- accessible environments
- equipment provision
- mobility support
- equal visibility within planning

SPCF believes this is an important area requiring continued focus.

## Theme 9: Support must feel joined up

Families described current systems as fragmented.

They often experience:

- repeating stories
- inconsistent advice
- poor communication between services
- gaps between education, health and social care

**Families need confidence that help is there – no matter their age, location, funding or criteria.**

Parents want services working together as one system.

This was seen as central to trust.

# WHAT SUCCESS WOULD LOOK LIKE TO FAMILIES

Families described clear outcomes that would show reforms are working.

They said they would notice:

- Less stress
- Feeling included
- Feeling recognised
- Feeling supported
- Better home life
- Reduced parental burnout
- Better outcomes for children
- Happier families

One family summarised success simply:

“Less stress. Included. Recognised. Supported.”

Another said:

“Happier parents, less burnout.”

These responses show families measure success not through policy language but through lived experience.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on all feedback, SPCF recommends:

1. Strengthen co-production

Ensure families and young people remain involved in all workstreams.

2. Explicitly include EBSA

Make EBSA visible within pathways, data interpretation and intervention planning.

3. Improve accountability

Define how schools and services will be monitored.

4. Invest in workforce capacity

Training alone is insufficient without staffing.

5. Maintain inclusive focus across all SEND

Ensure physical disabilities and complex needs remain visible.

6. Improve communication

Families need regular, accessible updates.

7. Define measurable outcomes

Families need evidence reforms are improving daily life.

## Final Reflection

Families do not oppose reform.

In fact, many welcome it.

What families want is confidence that this reform will be different from previous initiatives.

They want action, not just aspiration.

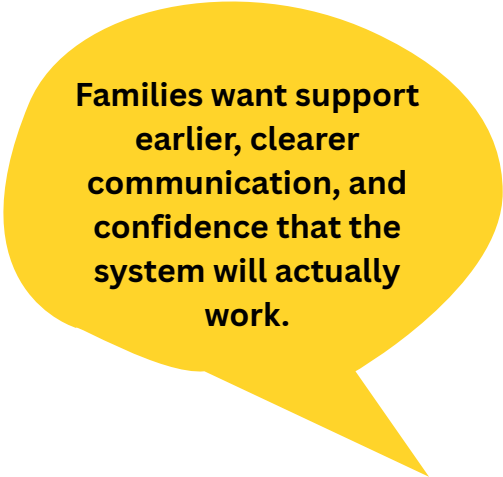
They want delivery, not just strategy.

They want systems that genuinely understand their children.

SPCF remains committed to ensuring family voice remains central to Southampton's SEND reform journey.

This report represents not just consultation feedback, but the lived experience of families navigating the SEND system every day.

Their voices must continue to shape the next steps.



**Families want support earlier, clearer communication, and confidence that the system will actually work.**