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SEND in Crisis: What teachers really think about SEND reform



Foreword

The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system is at a crossroads. With councils facing collective deficits of £5 billion and reform promised by the Government, we find ourselves asking not just what needs to change, but how those changes will affect the people who matter most: teachers and their pupils.

At Bett, we believe technology should empower educators, not replace them - allowing more time for teaching, mentoring, and inspiration. This principle becomes even more important when discussing SEND provision, where the human connection between teacher and student often makes the difference between success and failure. But this connection is now under unprecedented pressure.

The data presented here paints a picture of a profession grappling with impossible choices. Teachers see both over-diagnosis and under-diagnosis happening simultaneously. They recognise the social benefits of inclusion while struggling with its academic realities. They want to help every child succeed but lack the resources to do so effectively.

What emerges from these findings is not just a system in crisis, but a workforce caught between idealistic policy and practical reality. When 80% of teachers find it difficult to teach SEND students alongside mainstream students, we cannot simply dismiss this as resistance to change. These are professionals who entered education to help children learn, and they are telling us the current system is failing both SEND pupils and their classmates.

The Government's promised reforms loom large in teachers' minds, with two-thirds expressing concern about insufficient support for increased mainstream provision. This scepticism is not born from unwillingness to include SEND pupils, but from hard-won experience of what happens when policy aspirations meet classroom realities.

As we consider how technology might support this challenged system, we must remember that no app can replace a skilled teaching assistant, no algorithm can provide the patient support a child with autism needs, and no digital tool can substitute for smaller class sizes or proper training.

The path ahead requires honesty about these challenges while maintaining hope for solutions. This research provides that honesty. It shows us a profession that cares deeply about vulnerable pupils but needs practical support to serve them well. Teachers are sounding the alarm. The question is not whether change is needed, but whether we all have the courage to act on what they're telling us.



Duncan Verry
Portfolio Director, Bett

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Introduction

The SEND system in England faces its most significant crisis in decades. As councils accumulate eye-watering deficits and the Government promises wholesale reform, those closest to the daily reality of SEND provision – teachers – have concerns that extend far beyond budgets and policy papers.

This research captures the views of over 1,000 teachers, revealing a profession grappling with fundamental questions about how best to serve pupils with special educational needs. Their responses expose deep tensions between policy intentions and classroom realities, highlighting systemic issues that threaten both SEND pupils and their mainstream peers.

The findings come at a critical moment. With the Government white paper expected imminently and councils warning of bankruptcy if changes are not made, understanding teacher perspectives has never been more important. These are the professionals who will ultimately determine whether reforms succeed or fail, yet their views are rarely centred in policy discussions.

What emerges is a complex picture that defies simple narratives. Teachers see both over-diagnosis and under-diagnosis occurring simultaneously. They value inclusion for its social benefits while witnessing its academic costs. They want to support every child but struggle with insufficient resources and training.

Perhaps most significantly, teachers express profound scepticism about proposed reforms. More than half (56%) expect reforms to negatively impact SEND pupils with complex needs. This is not ideological opposition but practical concern born from daily experience of an already stretched system.

The stakes could not be higher. With more than 1.7 million pupils now identified as having special educational needs, decisions made today will shape the life chances of hundreds of thousands of children. Teachers' insights offer an essential perspective on how to get these decisions right.



Main findings

This research was carried out online by YouGov during July 2025 among a representative sample of **1,023** UK teachers. **573** teachers work in a primary environment and **450** work in a secondary or all-through setting. **62%** of respondents are classroom teachers and **38%** work in senior leadership roles. Not all percentage totals will add up to **100** due to rounding.



System failure acknowledged across the profession

Teachers deliver a damning verdict on the current SEND system, with only one in ten (10%) believing it works well. This represents one of the most unified positions in the entire survey, with 72% explicitly stating the system is not working.

Current SEND system



This assessment exceeds the typical divisions that characterise education debates. Whether primary or secondary, classroom teacher or senior leader, the message is consistent: the current approach to special educational needs is failing children, families and schools.

The scale of this dissatisfaction provides crucial context for understanding teacher reactions to proposed reforms. When a system is working for only one in ten professionals delivering it, the appetite for change should be substantial. Yet as subsequent findings reveal, teachers express deep scepticism about reform.

This apparent contradiction – widespread acknowledgement of system failure combined with pessimism about solutions – suggests teachers have lost faith not just in current arrangements but in the capacity of policy interventions to improve outcomes. Such professional cynicism, built from years of experiencing the gap between policy promises and classroom realities, presents a significant challenge for reformers.

The unanimity of teacher criticism also highlights how system dysfunction affects every aspect of SEND provision. It is not a case of some schools managing well while others struggle, but rather a comprehensive failure that touches every classroom and every teacher who encounters pupils with special educational needs.



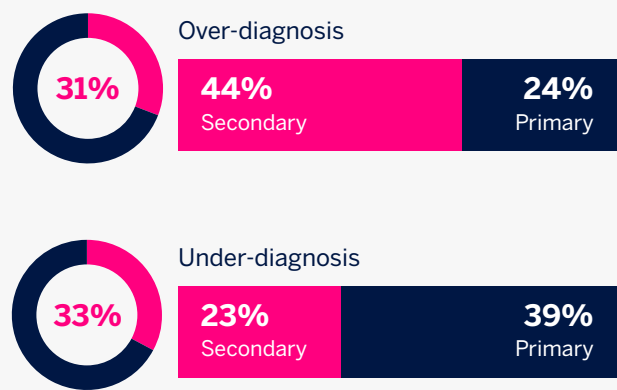
Teachers divided on SEND diagnosis accuracy

Teachers are evenly split on whether SEND is being diagnosed correctly in schools, with equal proportions believing it is both over-diagnosed (31%) and under-diagnosed (33%). This division reveals fundamental disagreements about identification processes that underpin the entire system.

The split becomes more pronounced when examined by school phase. Secondary teachers are significantly more likely to believe over-diagnosis is occurring, with 44% expressing this view compared to just 24% of primary teachers. Conversely, primary teachers are more concerned about under-diagnosis, with 39% holding this view compared to 23% of secondary colleagues.

Primary vs Secondary teachers

Views on SEND diagnosis accuracy



Behind these numbers lie competing pressures that teachers navigate daily. Those who see over-diagnosis point to specific drivers: 63% cite mental health issues being confused with SEND, while 61% believe parents and students seek diagnoses primarily for examination accommodations. These concerns suggest teachers feel diagnostic boundaries have become blurred, with temporary difficulties or strategic motivations leading to permanent SEND labels.

Teachers also identify systemic incentives that may drive over-identification. More than a quarter (26%) believe schools are motivated to identify children as eligible for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) to avoid paying support costs themselves, while 23% see additional funding as a driver. These responses reveal cynicism about institutional motivations that goes to the heart of how the system operates.

However, the equal proportion concerned about under-diagnosis suggests many teachers see children whose needs remain unrecognised. This reveals competing concerns in a system where EHCPs have increased by 140% over the past decade¹, significant numbers of teachers still believe needs are being missed.

The diagnostic divide extends beyond statistics to fundamental questions about what constitutes special educational need. When 43% of teachers cite “misunderstanding of SEND” as a reason for over-diagnosis, they signal confusion about definitions that hampers consistent identification across schools.

Perhaps most concerning is the intersection of diagnosis with disadvantage. Two-fifths of teachers (42%) believe students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be incorrectly labelled as SEND, with only 11% thinking it less likely. This suggests bias in identification processes, where socioeconomic-related challenges may be misinterpreted as innate learning difficulties.

¹The Guardian, 3 March 2025 – “Ministers plan major changes to SEND education in England”

The inclusion dilemma: social gains, academic costs

Teachers face a fundamental dilemma when considering mainstream inclusion for SEND pupils. They see clear social benefits but worry about academic costs. This creates a challenge that sits at the heart of policy debates.

On the positive side, teachers strongly believe mainstream settings benefit SEND pupils socially. Almost two-thirds (64%) agree that SEND students' social skills improve when taught in mainstream schools, compared to just 24% who think they worsen. The benefits extend beyond SEND pupils themselves, with 71% of teachers believing that having SEND students in classrooms improves non-SEND students' empathy, compared to only 11% who think empathy worsens.

Inclusion outcomes for SEND pupils

Social skills:



Academic outcomes:



These social gains represent significant victories for inclusive education. Teachers recognise that segregated provision, however well-intentioned, can limit opportunities for social interaction and peer learning that benefit all children. The development of empathy in mainstream pupils suggests inclusion creates more compassionate school communities. Research supports this view, with meta-analyses² finding that inclusive education can lead to modest positive gains in achievement for all students.

Yet despite this evidence base, our research of teachers' daily experience tells a different story. More than half of teachers (53%) believe academic outcomes are worse for SEND students when educated in mainstream schools, compared to just 23% who think outcomes improve. The concern is particularly acute around focus and attention, with 69% of teachers believing SEND pupils' ability to concentrate suffers in mainstream settings, compared to only 12% who see improvement.

The academic concerns extend to non-SEND pupils. Almost half of teachers (49%) believe the academic outcomes of mainstream students are made worse by having SEND pupils in the same classroom, compared to just 13% who see improvement. Two-thirds (66%) say it worsens their ability to focus, with only 9% reporting improved concentration.

This trade-off between social and academic outcomes forces teachers into impossible choices. Do they prioritise the clear social benefits of inclusion, knowing academic progress may suffer? Or do they advocate for separate provision that might improve learning outcomes but reduce social integration?

The dilemma is made more acute by teachers' practical experience of inclusion challenges. Four-fifths (80%) say they find it difficult to teach SEND students alongside mainstream students in their lessons, with only 15% finding it easy. This difficulty is not abstract but lived daily by teachers trying to meet diverse needs within single classrooms.

Currently, the vast majority of SEND pupils in mainstream schools are taught through full integration, with 76% in the same classroom as other students. However, teachers are deeply divided about whether this is the right approach, with 30% believing most SEND students should be educated in special schools compared to 28% who favour mainstream provision.

²Szumski, Smogorzewska, and Karwowski, 2017; Kefallinou et al., 2020

Teacher fears about SEND reform eclipse hopes

Teachers express overwhelming pessimism about proposed SEND reforms, with concerns far outweighing hopes across every aspect of the system. This scepticism suggests significant challenges ahead for policymakers seeking to build professional support for change.

Teachers' main concerns about SEND reforms

More SEND pupils in mainstream with insufficient support

67%

Reduced funding for mainstream schools

50%

Teaching staff not adequately trained

36%

Increased pressure on special school places

29%

Lack of clarity about replacement systems

22%

Pupils with greatest needs will be overlooked

22%



Teacher fears about SEND reform eclipse hopes

The dominant fear centres on capacity and support. Two-thirds of teachers (67%) worry about more SEND pupils entering mainstream schools without sufficient support – by far the largest concern raised. This reflects teachers' lived experience of inclusion without adequate resources, and their belief that expanding mainstream provision without addressing underlying support deficits will simply spread existing problems more widely.

Financial concerns rank second, with half of teachers (50%) fearing reduced funding for mainstream schools to support SEND pupils. Given that councils face collective SEND deficits of £5 billion, teachers' worries about resource constraints appear well-founded. The fear suggests awareness that reform may be driven more by financial necessity than educational vision.

Training emerges as another major concern, with more than a third of teachers (36%) believing staff are not adequately prepared for increased SEND responsibilities. This training gap becomes critical if mainstream schools are expected to serve pupils previously educated in specialist settings. Teachers appear to recognise their own professional development needs while doubting these will be addressed.

Concerns about specialist provision also feature prominently. Almost three in ten teachers (29%) worry about increased pressure on already stretched special school places, while 22% fear pupils with the greatest needs will be overlooked. These responses suggest teachers understand that inclusion cannot work for every child and worry about adequate provision for those with the most complex needs.

When asked about specific impacts, teacher pessimism is striking across every category measured. More than half believe reforms will negatively affect SEND pupils with complex needs (56%), moderate learning difficulties (53%), and social, emotional and mental health needs (57%). Similar proportions expect negative impacts on SEND pupils currently in mainstream schools (56%) and their parents (56%).

The professional impact appears particularly concerning to teachers, with two-thirds (66%) expecting reforms to negatively affect mainstream school teachers compared to just 7% anticipating positive outcomes. This suggests teachers see themselves bearing the brunt of changes without adequate support or recognition.

Perhaps most telling is teachers' assessment of reform impacts on non-SEND students. Almost half (48%) expect negative effects compared to only 7% anticipating benefits. This suggests teachers believe reforms may compromise education for mainstream pupils while failing to adequately serve SEND children – a lose-lose scenario that explains their resistance.

The scale of teacher scepticism presents a significant implementation challenge. When the professionals expected to deliver reforms express such comprehensive pessimism, success becomes much harder to achieve. Building teacher confidence in proposed changes may require addressing their specific concerns about capacity, resources and training before reforms can succeed.

What teachers actually need to support SEND pupils

While teachers express pessimism about proposed reforms, they are clear about what would actually help them support SEND pupils more effectively. Their priorities focus on practical classroom interventions rather than systemic restructuring.

What teachers want for SEND support

Additional teaching assistant support in classrooms

65%

Smaller class sizes when teaching SEND pupils

58%

Improved school facilities and resources

33%

Better access to specialist external support services

25%

More time for planning and preparation

23%

More specialist training on different types of SEND

22%

Additional teaching assistant support emerges as the overwhelming priority, with 65% of teachers identifying this as most helpful. This reflects the reality that many SEND pupils require individualised attention that classroom teachers cannot provide while managing entire classes. Teaching assistants offer a practical solution that maintains inclusion while ensuring adequate support.

Smaller class sizes rank as the second priority, chosen by 58% of teachers. This addresses the fundamental challenge of differentiation – adapting teaching to meet diverse needs becomes exponentially more difficult as class make-up changes. Teachers recognise that meaningful inclusion requires manageable numbers that allow individual attention.

Improved school facilities and resources ranks third, selected by 33% of teachers. This suggests many schools lack the basic infrastructure needed to support SEND pupils effectively – from sensory regulation spaces to assistive technology. The priority indicates that inclusion requires more than goodwill, it demands appropriate physical environments.

What teachers actually need to support SEND pupils

Access to specialist external support services ranks fourth at **25%**, highlighting teachers' recognition of their own limitations. Many SEND pupils require expertise that classroom teachers do not possess – from speech and language therapy to behavioural intervention. Teachers want better links to specialists who can provide targeted support.

More time for planning and preparation appeals to **23%** of teachers, reflecting the additional workload that differentiation creates. Supporting SEND pupils effectively requires individualised planning that standard preparation time may not accommodate. Teachers seek recognition that inclusion demands additional planning time.

Specialist training on different types of SEND attracts support from **22%** of teachers. While not the top priority, this indicates awareness of knowledge gaps that limit effective support. This aligns with broader evidence. Research by Ofsted³ found SEND was the most requested training area among teachers, highlighting the gap between what is offered and what educators actually need. Teachers want professional development that equips them to recognise and respond to diverse needs.

The pattern of responses reveals teachers' practical focus. Rather than seeking fundamental system change, they want resources that make their current challenging job more manageable. Additional adults, smaller classes and better facilities would immediately improve their capacity to support SEND pupils without requiring wholesale restructuring.

This practical orientation contrasts sharply with the systemic reforms the Government is said to be considering. While policymakers focus on structural changes to reduce costs and increase inclusion, teachers prioritise immediate classroom-level interventions that would help them serve pupils better now.

The gap between teacher priorities and policy direction may explain much of the scepticism expressed about reforms. If changes do not address teachers' stated needs – more support, smaller classes, better resources – professional buy-in will remain limited regardless of policy elegance.



³Ofsted, Independent review of teachers' professional development in schools: phase 1 findings (May 2024)

Technology support remains limited but shows promise

Teachers in mainstream schools report modest but meaningful use of educational technology to support SEND pupils, with assistive tools showing particular promise for specific needs. However, overall adoption rates suggest significant untapped potential in this area.

Text-to-speech and speech-to-text software leads technology adoption, used effectively by 17% of teachers. This reflects the clear utility of assistive tools for pupils with literacy difficulties, dyslexia and other reading challenges. The technology directly addresses barriers to learning in ways that teachers find practically useful.

Visual scheduling and communication tools rank second at 16%, indicating particular value for pupils with autism spectrum conditions and communication difficulties. These tools help structure learning and reduce anxiety by making expectations clear and predictable.

Behaviour tracking and reward systems attract support from 15% of teachers, suggesting value for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs. Digital tools can provide consistent tracking and immediate feedback that supports behaviour modification approaches.

Assistive writing and spelling tools are used effectively by 10% of teachers, again targeting specific literacy difficulties. These tools can reduce barriers to written expression that limit academic progress for many SEND pupils.

Sensory regulation apps and tools are used by 7% of teachers, addressing needs of pupils who struggle with sensory processing in busy classroom environments.

While these adoption rates appear modest, they represent meaningful support for teachers dealing with diverse needs. The pattern suggests educational technology works best when it directly addresses specific barriers to learning rather than attempting wholesale solutions.

The relatively low adoption rates also indicate significant room for growth. Many teachers may be unaware of available tools or lack training in their effective use. This represents an opportunity for professional development that could immediately enhance SEND support without requiring additional staffing or resources.

The focus on assistive rather than replacement technology aligns with teachers' expressed needs. They seek tools that help them teach more effectively, not systems that attempt to automate teaching relationships. This suggests a role for technology that augments professional expertise rather than replacing it.



Conclusion

This report reveals a teaching profession caught between competing pressures and impossible choices. Teachers see a SEND system that clearly is not working – with only one in ten believing current arrangements succeed – yet express deep pessimism about proposed solutions.

The research exposes fundamental tensions that reforms must address. Teachers value the social benefits of inclusion, seeing improved social skills for SEND pupils and enhanced empathy in mainstream students. However, they simultaneously worry about academic costs, with over half believing SEND pupils' outcomes suffer in mainstream settings and almost half concerned about impacts on their classmates.

Perhaps most significantly, teachers feel ill-equipped to manage these tensions effectively. The vast majority find it difficult to teach SEND students alongside mainstream pupils, while two-thirds fear reforms will increase mainstream provision without adequate support. This gap between policy aspirations and classroom capacity threatens to undermine reform efforts before they begin.

The diagnostic divide further complicates the picture. Equal numbers of teachers see over-diagnosis and under-diagnosis occurring simultaneously, suggesting fundamental disagreements about identification that weaken system foundations. When over two-fifths believe disadvantaged students are more likely to be incorrectly labelled as SEND, questions of equity and bias enter an already complex debate.

Teacher priorities offer a practical path forward. Rather than seeking systemic restructuring, they want additional teaching assistant support, smaller class sizes and improved facilities. These immediate interventions could improve outcomes without requiring the wholesale changes that generate such professional scepticism.

The challenge for policymakers is clear: reforms designed primarily to address financial pressures may fail without addressing teachers' practical concerns. When two-thirds of teachers expect reforms to negatively impact them personally, building professional support becomes essential for success.



Technology and support - a path through the SEND crisis

The data presented in this report represents something remarkable: the voices of over 1,000 teachers speaking candidly about one of the most pressing challenges in education. While I'm saddened by the level of pessimism these findings reveal, I remain hopeful that this moment can become a turning point rather than a crisis without resolution.

The teachers surveyed have made their priorities clear. They want more teaching assistants, smaller class sizes and better resources. These are not unreasonable demands, but practical needs born from daily classroom reality. Yet delivering on these priorities at scale requires more than good intentions. It requires smart use of the resources we already have, and that's where technology becomes not just helpful, but essential.

I am convinced that technology ought to sit at the centre of any viable solution to the SEND crisis. However, technology is only powerful when teachers know it exists and understand how to use it effectively. This is why exhibitions matter. In my 20 years attending Bett, I've watched it evolve into the world's leading EdTech show, drawing schools from across the globe. Every year brings innovations that address real classroom challenges. But too many teachers often remain unaware of what's available.

As Chair of the British Assistive Technology Association, I've been able to gain a strong perspective on both the problem and potential solutions. The UK is an absolute powerhouse in assistive technology development. We have companies creating world-class tools that can genuinely transform learning experiences for children with special educational needs. The challenge has never been the quality of what's available. The challenge has been awareness, particularly in primary schools where early intervention matters most.

This is starting to change, and government action deserves recognition. The Education Secretary's announcement at Bett 2025 that more teachers would receive training in assistive technology marked an important shift in policy thinking. But the most significant development has been the commitment to roll out assistive technology lending libraries to local authorities across the country.

These libraries represent a sensible approach to a complex problem. In the United States, such libraries are federally mandated, with one in every state. They work because they remove the barriers that prevent schools from exploring assistive technology. Schools can try tools before committing budgets. Teachers can experiment with different approaches. SENCOs can build their knowledge systematically rather than making expensive guesses about what might work.

The lending library model addresses something this report highlights. Teachers want technology that augments their expertise rather than replacing it. When schools can borrow assistive technology and test it with their pupils, they get the chance to discover which tools genuinely help and which don't. This builds professional confidence and ensures that when schools do invest, they're making informed decisions based on evidence from their own classrooms.

The pessimism revealed in this report is understandable. Teachers are overwhelmed, under-resourced and facing demands that often feel impossible. Yet pessimism and pragmatism can coexist. While we acknowledge the scale of the challenge, we can also recognise that some solutions exist right now, not in some distant reformed system. But technology alone cannot solve the SEND crisis. It must be part of a broader ecosystem of support that includes training, professional development and practical guidance.

Assistive technology represents one piece of this puzzle. It is one that we can implement immediately.

The teachers who contributed to this research have done the sector a service by speaking honestly about their concerns. Now it's our collective responsibility to ensure their voices lead to meaningful action.

The British Assistive Technology Association has launched a "Power of AT" campaign to support teachers, SENCOs, school leaders and tech providers. The aim is to ensure that every learner has access to the tools they need to thrive and succeed. Get involved by registering to access the full videos at this link.



Jack Churchill OBE
Chair of The British Assistive
Technology Association

SEND VILLAGE AT Bett UK 2026

Around two in five children are recorded to have some kind of special educational need at some point between reception and Year 11. Based on this, it's likely that there is a child with special educational needs and disabilities in every classroom, making SEND a part of every teacher and school leader's role.

In Association with



The **SEND Village** at Bett UK 2026 is more than a space, it's a destination for educators and leaders who refuse to accept limits on what learners can achieve.

Returning almost double the size, the **SEND Village** is expanding into an unmissable hub of solutions, resources and groundbreaking innovations that are reshaping how we empower every learner to thrive.

What you'll discover:

- **World-class CPD** delivered live from our theatre stage, where trailblazing experts and inspiring voices will share practical strategies, future-shaping research and real success stories from the classroom.
- **Hands-on innovation** with the latest assistive technologies, communication tools and learning solutions all on show. From text-to-speech software to sensory regulation tools, discover solutions that directly address learning barriers.
- **Networking opportunities** with fellow SEND professionals facing similar challenges. Connect with teachers who understand the inclusion dilemma and build the support network that you need.
- **Expert guidance** from specialists who recognise that technology should augment teaching expertise and not replace it. Find the tools that will help you teach more effectively.



Whether you're seeking immediate classroom interventions or long-term strategic solutions, the SEND Village offers practical support and networking opportunities designed to address the real challenges facing SEND professionals. It's where the practical solutions teachers want – more support, better resources, specialist training – meet the innovative tools that can make inclusion work for everyone.

Visit us at Bett UK 2026 and discover what's possible when innovation serves inclusion.

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