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Trauma-Informed SEND Reforms

Ensuring meaningful investment for children, families, and schools
and reducing systems-generated trauma

Dr Dimitra Hartas and Dr Samantha Flynn, SELCS, University of Warwick; Matthew Carr and John Furlong, Cerebra

About this briefing

On 23 February 2026, the government published the White Paper: [Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#), setting out a wide-ranging programme of reform to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) system in England. SEND has not been fit for purpose for many years, and reform is long overdue for the sake of children, families, and schools. The Children and Families Act 2014 expanded legal entitlements without providing the necessary resources and infrastructure to deliver them.

A central feature of the proposed SEND reforms is the commitment to specialist SEND support in state schools.

Consequently, the Department for Education announced a [£4 billion investment to embed specialist SEND support](#) to enable schools to access specialist expertise, improve early

identification of needs, and implement targeted interventions.

In this briefing, we draw on the recent [Cerebra](#) report about [Systems Generated Trauma \(SGT\)](#): the severe harm families experience as a result of the very systems meant to support them. We use the SGT framework to pose questions about how the government will ensure that this investment is meaningful in tackling the core problems (e.g., austerity-led cuts, reductions in early intervention, slow and adversarial systems, regional and socioeconomic disparities in accessing Education, Health and Care Plans [EHCPs], workforce shortages) at the heart of the current SEND systems.

“We are not the same people. We are broken and traumatised. We cannot trust anyone anymore.”

- Quote from the Cerebra SGT Report

Context

The SEND crisis should not be seen in isolation. Since 2010, austerity policies have led to real-terms budget cuts, larger class sizes, and deteriorating infrastructure in state schools. A [report](#) published by The Institute for Fiscal Studies in January 2026 stated that the total school spending per pupil (aged 5-18) in 2025 was about the same level, in real terms, as in 2010. This is the sharpest decline in state school funding in decades, affecting the workforce and reducing spending on SEND provision. The depletion of SEND resources resulted in an adversarial system whereby parents must fight to secure basic entitlements for their children.

Furthermore, Michael Gove's curriculum reforms have resulted in more didactic teaching with a focus on 'British values' along with an increase in standardised testing and metrics. Combined with minimal SEND training for teachers and overwhelmed Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinators (SENDCOs), many classrooms became ill-equipped to meet diverse learning needs.

Trauma-informed reforms

We strongly recommend that the government consider trauma-informed approaches as a pillar of all SEND reforms in the UK.

Recent research from Cerebra, a national charity supporting families of children with brain conditions, highlights how parents of disabled children experience persistent social harm (SGT) through their interactions with public services, particularly within education. For

example, they experience psychological, social, and economic harm when standard EHCP assessments are refused, forcing parents into the SEND Tribunal system. Furthermore, parents are often blamed for their child's distress, with safeguarding issues being raised inappropriately.

The White Paper emphasises restoring families' confidence in the SEND system, acknowledging a breakdown of trust between parents and schools and expressing an ambition to move away from "a broken social contract to families as partners." This recognition is overdue.

Genuine partnership replacing suspicion and parental blame

We recommend that parent-school partnerships should reflect institutional accountability as well as parental responsibility.

For this to happen, harmful institutional cultures and policies must change. The key question is whether the White Paper meaningfully addresses the systemic issues in SEND, including those rooted in austerity and inequality, so that schools can engage with parents in a trauma-informed way.

However, the White Paper largely sets out expectations for how parents should change their behaviour to meet school requirements, with compliance enforced where necessary. Genuine partnership cannot be built solely on conditionality and compliance. It requires dialogue, understanding of family circumstances, and recognition of the multiple disadvantages many families face, particularly those already failed by the SEND system.

Over time, the balance of parental responsibility and institutional accountability has eroded, with increasing pressure placed on parents to compensate for systemic failings and to secure SEND provision for their children. Many parents are shamed for advocating for their child's needs or blamed when their child cannot attend school due to trauma caused by inadequate provision. A deficit-based approach to parental engagement will not rebuild trust. This matters profoundly, given the social harm already experienced by disadvantaged families navigating education and welfare systems.

Rebuilding parents' trust through statutory support

We recommend that access to a Tribunal with the power to name a placement should remain as a viable option for when parents require legal recourse. Further, we recommend that access to Tribunals for extended appeals is an essential aspect of rebuilding parental trust in statutory systems designed to support them and their children.

Asking parents to resolve issues via school complaints systems (rather than SEND appeals), as currently proposed in the White Paper, is likely to have a negative impact on parent-school collaboration and generate mistrust and trauma.

To rebuild trust, the government must reassure parents that the shift toward meeting needs in mainstream settings will not reduce access to statutory support, particularly at key transition points (ages 11 and 16), when reassessment often causes significant stress and uncertainty. Parents also need confidence that restricting EHCPs will not push more

children into non-statutory plans lacking legal enforceability.

Ensuring school staff are appropriately trained

We propose that a trauma-informed approach is essential, and staff must be trained appropriately. Without it, SEND reforms risk reinforcing the very dynamics that have damaged parental and child trust.

Although the White Paper references staff training, it implies that teaching assistants will deliver most SEND support, with specialist provision reserved for "complex" cases. Yet it is unclear how complexity will be defined, how thresholds will be assessed, or how parents will be involved. Further, the issue of complexity is unlikely to be universally defined by professionals and parents, whereby parents of highly masking children may experience significant complexity outside of school, such as sleeping/eating difficulties, emotional or behavioural difficulties (e.g., "meltdowns" or "shutdowns"), or self-harm at home.

There is also little detail on specialist teacher training or how specialist expertise will be embedded in mainstream settings. There is a lack of clarity about the role and involvement of 'Experts at Hand', especially considering workforce shortages in Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Educational Psychology, coupled with regional disparities in accessing specialist support and therapies.

Investment in training, recruitment and retention incentives should be carefully considered. For many families, specialist schools and specialist teachers have been a lifeline, yet their role is barely addressed.

The importance of early identification and intervention

We recommend that significant attention be paid to identifying workforce shortages and pressures of demand over supply while identifying SEND reform investments and effective partnerships.

The White Paper highlights that early intervention will be prioritised within the reform, and this is an encouraging message given the previous drastic cuts to spending on universal and targeted provisions. The focus on early intervention may not, however, be enough without attention being paid to clear pathways for early identification of needs, which is a cornerstone of early intervention provision.

Given the substantial investment that the Government is committing to SEND Reform in the UK, it would be remiss not to commit investment to early identification too. Such early identification and intervention, alongside effective partnership working, have the potential to prevent SGT for families and children with SEND by focusing early on and providing for the needs of children and their families.

Ensuring meaningful and effective co-production

We strongly recommend co-production to engage parents and professionals as active participants, rather than being passive or vilified for advocating, which is particularly important during transitions.

Parent views and advocacy are crucial, considering the proposal to reassess children's EHCPs and introduce "Individual Support Plans" during the transition from primary to secondary school. This represents a significant reform with implications for continuity of care at a critical point in children's education. Also, it is not clear how parents will be involved in the creation of the proposed Individual Support Plans (ISPs) and how they would set a legally binding duty to secure provision and ensure schools and local authorities would be held accountable.

Further information:

[Systems Generated Trauma - Cerebra](#)

Contact the researchers

Dr Dimitra Hartas, Email:
d.hartas@warwick.ac.uk

Dr Samantha Flynn, Email:
S.Flynn.1@warwick.ac.uk

Matthew Carr and John Furlong, Policy email:
policy@cerebra.org.uk and Media email:
comms@cerebra.org.uk

Recommendations

Recommendation 1:

More explicitly consider systems-generated trauma (SGT) and embed trauma-informed approaches as a pillar of all SEND reforms in the UK.

This could involve undertaking a thorough SGT-informed feasibility analysis of the current reform plans, in a meaningful partnership with parents and schools, specifically considering multi-faceted needs assessments, timeframes, risk analyses, implementation and monitoring processes.

Recommendation 2:

To ensure meaningful change, there must be accountability from the government and its agencies involved in supporting children with SEND and their families.

This includes addressing workforce and training demands for Experts at Hand, providing transparent pathways for multi-agency and cross-school sharing of expertise, which should be standard, and ensuring that SENDCOs receive additional training to effectively coordinate multidisciplinary teams.

Recommendation 3:

Retain access to Tribunal with the power to name a placement and for extended appeals.

Rerouting parents through school complaints systems, rather than SEND appeals, risks compounding existing SGT and further eroding parental trust in school and statutory systems.