

A System in Transition: Navigating the Reform of Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland Assembly Research and
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Introduction

This brief has been prepared to provide the Committee for Health with a clear and structured overview of how Special Educational Needs (SEN) are defined, recorded and supported in Northern Ireland and to assist in shaping future lines of inquiry on SEN prevalence. Its primary purpose is to set out the key components of the current system - including categories of need, terminology, levels of support and the range of educational provision - and to present the available data in a way that clarifies both recent trends and the factors driving change.

The paper also aims to establish a coherent baseline from which the Committee can consider emerging questions, including where growth is occurring, how need is distributed across Northern Ireland, and how ongoing reforms may influence identification and support in the years ahead. As the SEN system is undergoing significant

transition, the brief highlights the context within which prevalence data should be interpreted and the implications this may have for future scrutiny and research.



Specific Questions Identified by the Committee:

- Provide an overview of the current SEN system, including EA and school-level categories of need and the use of the term SEN rather than SEND.
- Explain terminology used for levels and types of need (e.g., MLD, SLD, social/communication needs).
- Present statistics illustrating where growth in SEN is occurring, including comparative reference points (e.g., IPSOS SEN report).
- Map the range of SEN provision (e.g., special schools, SPiMs, specialist supports).
- Display EA-provided data by council area alongside pupil numbers to show distribution and change over time.
- Identify exactly which categories are rising, with attention to growth in statements and whether increases are concentrated in communication/interaction, physical needs, or other categories.

Key Points



Prevalence and Growth

- 19.8% of all pupils in Northern Ireland in 2024/25 have identified Special Educational Needs (SEN).
- The number of pupils with Statements has risen by 156% over two decades, indicating a significant shift towards higher-level needs requiring statutory provision.
- Overall SEN numbers have grown by 32% since 2011/12.

Where SEN Support Is Delivered



- 83% of pupils with SEN are educated in mainstream schools, underscoring the central role of mainstream settings in meeting SEN need.
- Only a minority access specialist provision, including special schools or Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs).



Distribution of Need

- Cognition & Learning (C&L) is the largest overarching SEN category, consistently accounting for the majority of identified need.
- Significant growth is also seen in Speech, Language & Communication Needs (SLCN) and Social, Emotional & Behavioural Needs (SEBN/SBEW).



Geographical Variation

- SEN prevalence shows varies between council and Trust areas, with Belfast displaying the highest concentrations of need across several metrics and also the highest levels of deprivation.
- However, this variation exists within an overall pattern of high SEN prevalence across all regions, meaning that while Belfast sits at the upper end, no area has a low prevalence rate.
- Despite this, Belfast has the lowest Local Impact Team (LIT) workforce capacity relative to its SEN pupil population, indicating a clear mismatch between demand and specialist support.

Key Points



Costs and System Pressure

- Spending on SEN has more than doubled in ten years, now exceeding £620 million, raising concerns about sustainability.
- Growth in statutory assessments and demand for specialist placements is placing sustained pressure on the EA and schools.



Comparisons Beyond NI

- Headline SEN rates in NI appear higher than those in other UK nations; however, differences in definitions, identification frameworks, and data collection methods mean these comparisons cannot be interpreted at face value.
- When compared with a demographically similar region (e.g., North West England), NI's SEN rate aligns far more closely (approx. 18% vs 17%).



System Change and Implementation

- The SEN system is undergoing reform, with the Graduated Response Framework, revised staged model, Local Impact Teams (LITs) and SPiMs reshaping pathways to support.
- Progress is evident, but key enablers — including workforce consistency, terminology alignment, and data standardisation — remain incomplete.



Data Quality and Recording

- Variability in how schools record SEN categories and levels of need continues to affect data reliability.

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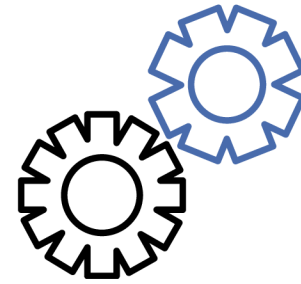
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Part 1: Understanding SEN Prevalence in Northern Ireland

Systemic Pressures Have Made Fundamental Reform Unavoidable

System pressures have built up over time



Northern Ireland's SEN system has been under growing pressure for many years.

Key issues include:

- Increasing numbers of children requiring SEN support.
- Variation in provision and experiences across schools.
- Delays in assessment and statutory processes.
- Increasing requests for Statements and more complex cases.
- Lack of coordination and clear communication across services.
- Calls from schools and families for clearer processes and earlier intervention.

These pressures intensified over time, signalling that the existing system could no longer meet need in a consistent or sustainable way

The Evidence Base for Reform



To understand and address these pressures, several scrutiny exercises were commissioned.

- The resulting reports (7 in total), each examining different aspects of SEN provision, identified over 200 areas requiring improvement.
- The joint DE-EA End-to-End Review (2023) brought this evidence together, confirming the scale of pressures and demonstrating the need for long-term, coordinated reform.



Together, the long term pressures and consolidated scrutiny findings made fundamental SEN reform both necessary and unavoidable.

Demand for SEN Support Has Increased Dramatically Over Two Decades

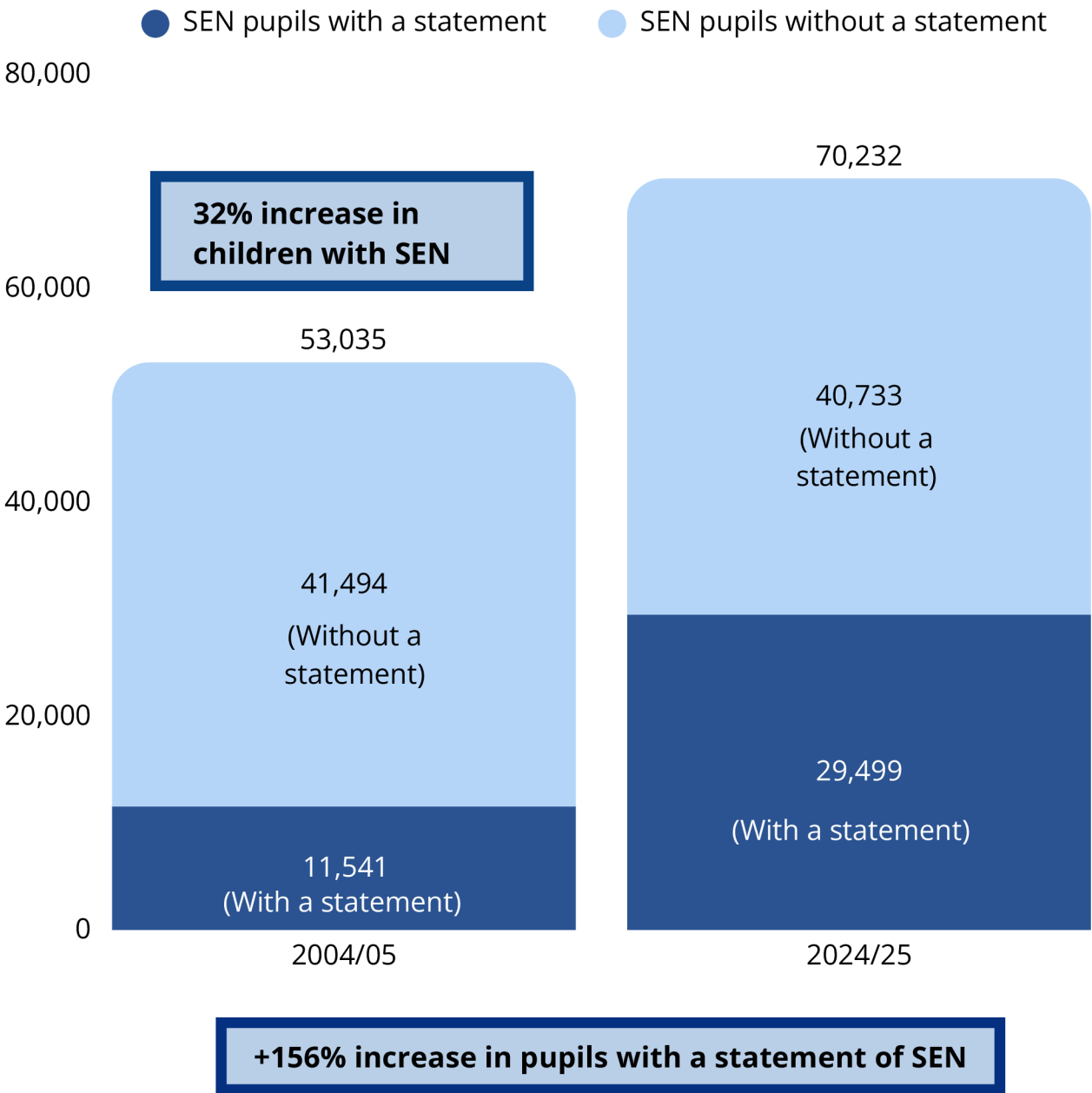
The rising demand for Special Educational Needs (SEN) support is a major driver of the ongoing system reform, marked by substantial growth in both the total number of pupils identified and those requiring the highest level of statutory support.

- Across the last two decades, there has been a 32% increase in the total number of children and young people with SEN.
- Growth has been particularly sharp among the highest needs pupils: there has been a 156% increase in children and young people who have a Statement of SEN.
- The EA reported that there were **2,679 open statutory assessment cases** at the end of June 2025.



This demand growth has been accompanied by a rise in complex cases and increasing requests for statements, contributing to widespread systemic pressures, including delays in assessment processes.

Growth in SEN Pupil Numbers 2004/05 Vs 2024/25



Most Pupils with SEN are Educated in Mainstream Settings

In 2024/25, children and young people with SEN accounted for 19.8% of total enrolments across the system

Despite the increase in statemented pupils, the majority of SEN pupils are supported within mainstream settings, demonstrating the breadth of support required across all educational environments.

- The majority of pupils with SEN (82.9%) attend a mainstream school.
- A smaller proportion attend highly specialist settings: 10.6% attend special schools, and 6.5% attend Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs).

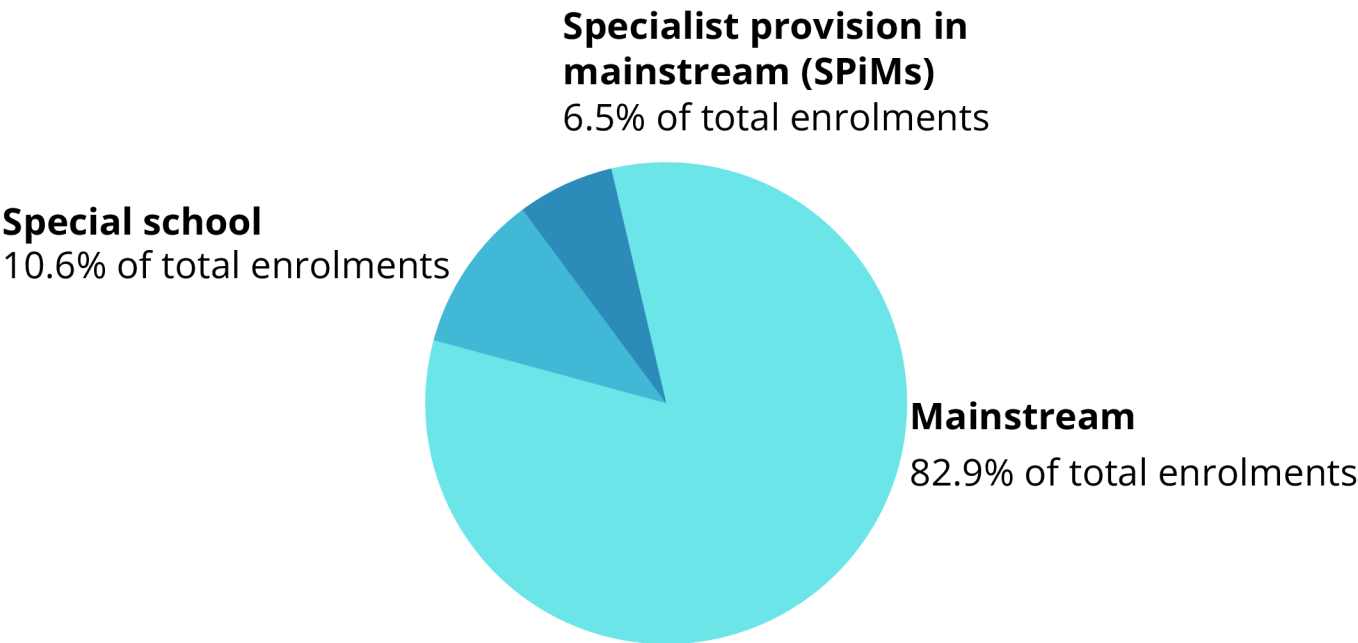


Only a small proportion of pupils with SEN attend specialist provision; Mainstream provision must meet a broad range of SEN needs

19.8%

of total enrolments in 2024/25 were pupils with SEN

The majority of those enrolments were in mainstream education



Rapidly Rising Costs Are Threatening Financial Sustainability

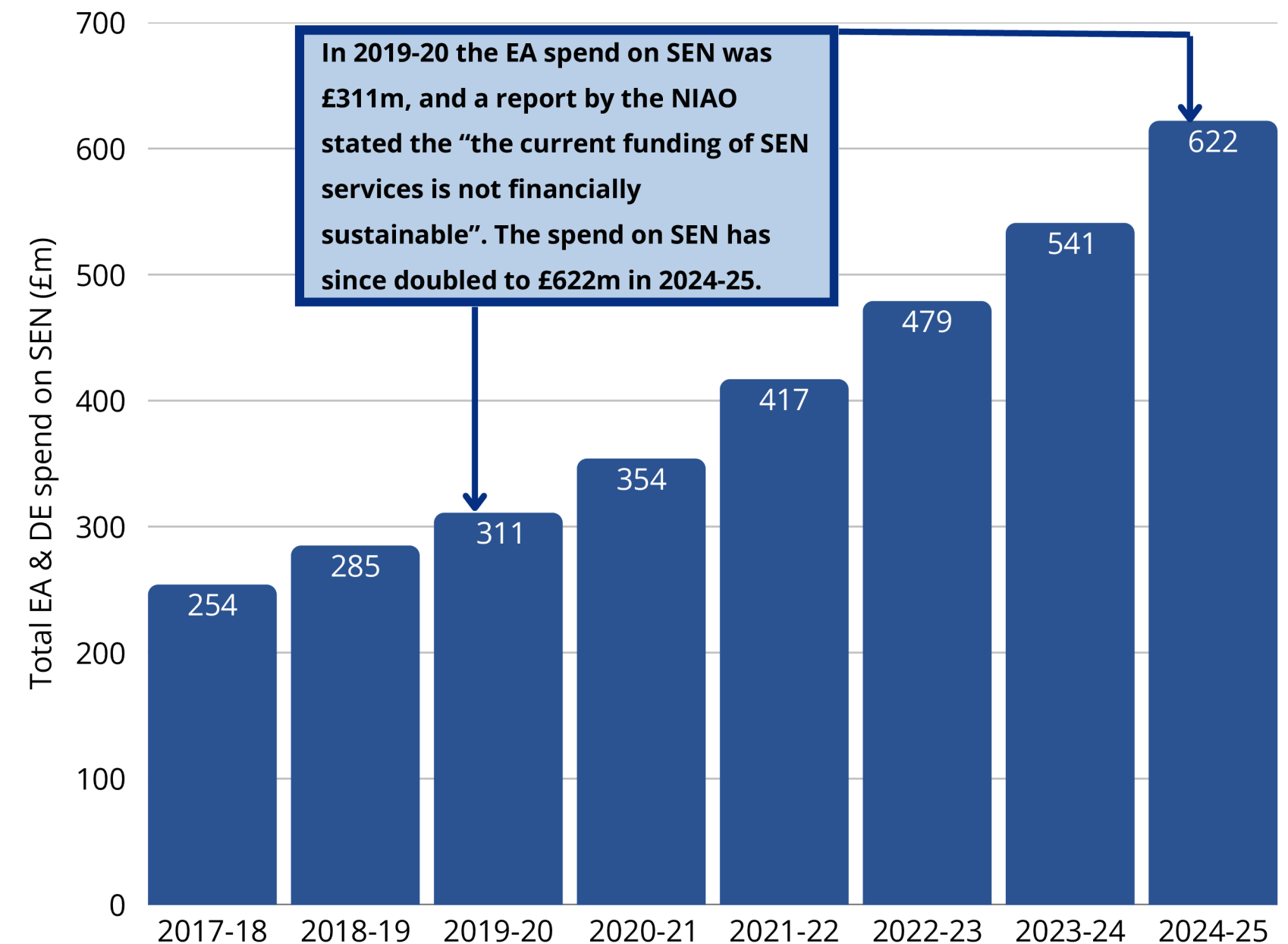
The rising demand for Special Educational Needs (SEN) support has resulted in a critical financial burden on the system, with expenditure doubling in recent years.

- In 2019-20, the Education Authority (EA) spend on SEN was £311 million.
- A report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) during that period noted that "the current funding of SEN services is not financially sustainable".
- Despite this warning, the total expenditure by the EA and the Department of Education (DE) on SEN provision has continued to surge, having doubled to £622 million in 2024-25.

(With a statement)

(With a statement)

Total EA and DE Spend on SEN (£M)



SEN Prevalence Is Closely Linked to Deprivation

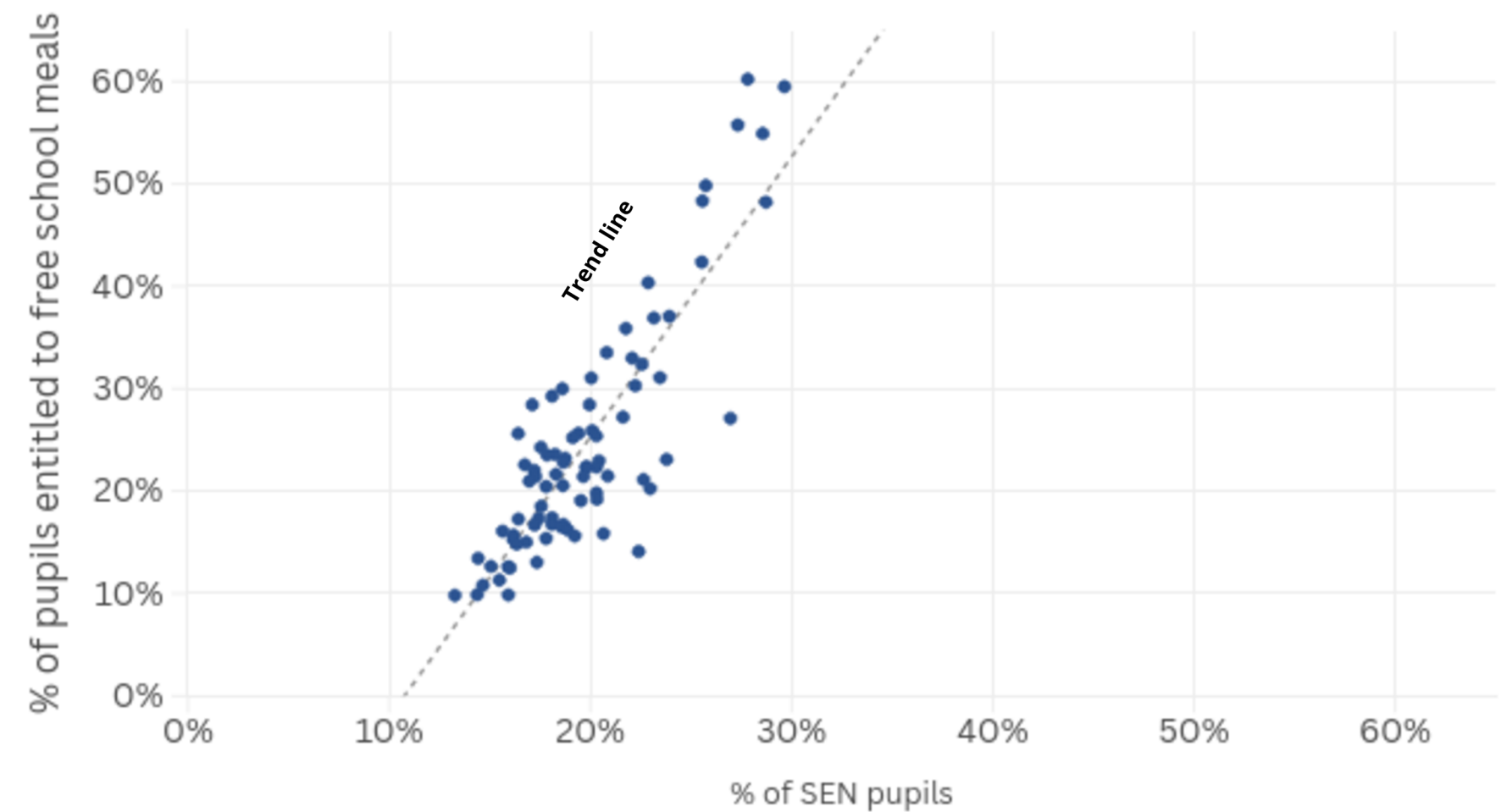
While the rising overall costs and numbers drive the need for reform, analysis shows that the prevalence of SEN is not uniformly distributed across Northern Ireland. Deprivation appears to be a significant contributing factor to the high demand.

- Analysis of district electoral areas indicates a positive association between the proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals and those with SEN
- Areas with higher levels of deprivation, as proxied by free school meal entitlement, tend to exhibit a greater prevalence of SEN within school enrolments



These findings suggest that population characteristics, such as levels of deprivation, health profiles, and early childhood factors can contribute to the variation seen in SEN identification rates.

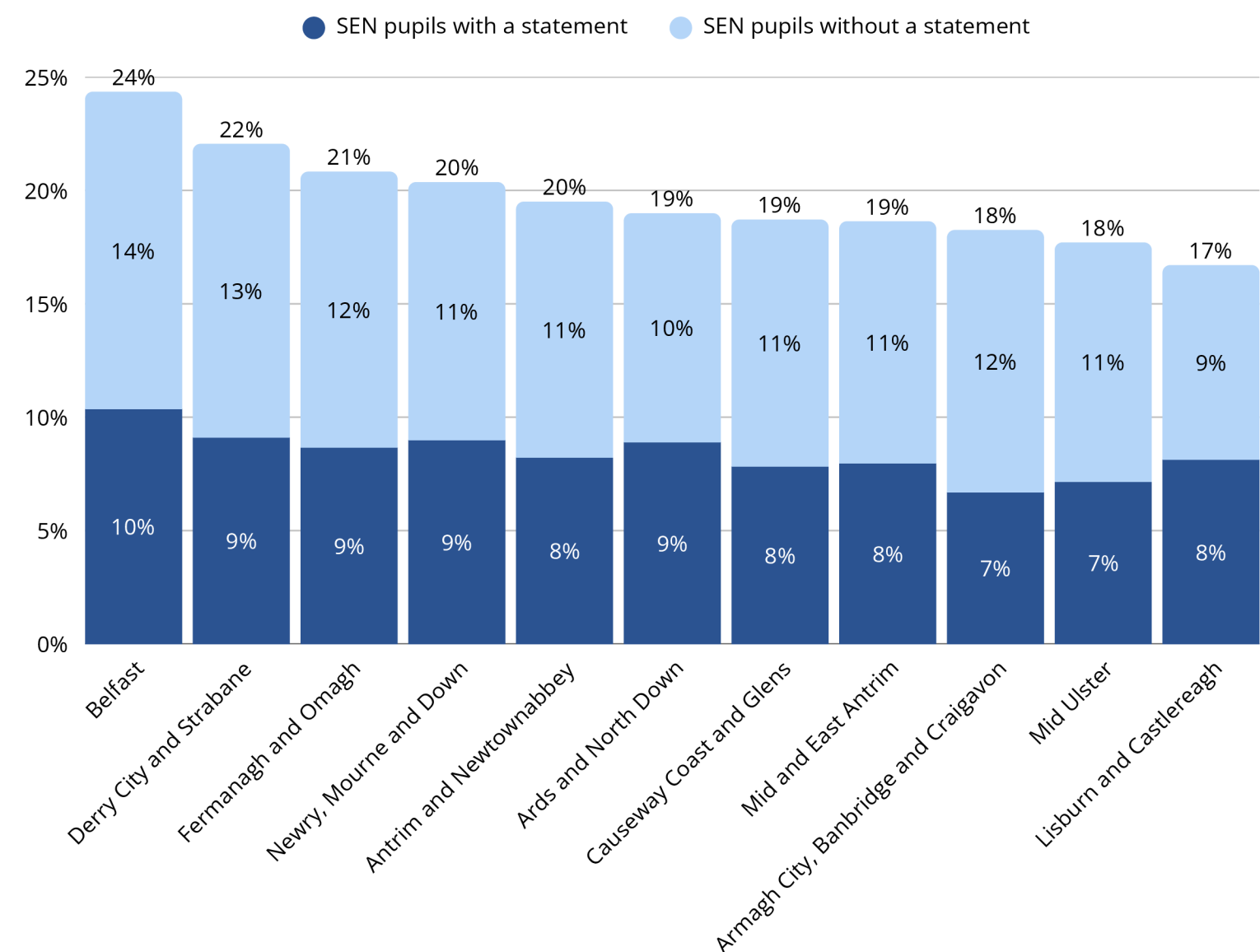
Free school meal entitlement vs SEN (as % of total enrolment) by District Electoral Area, 2024-25



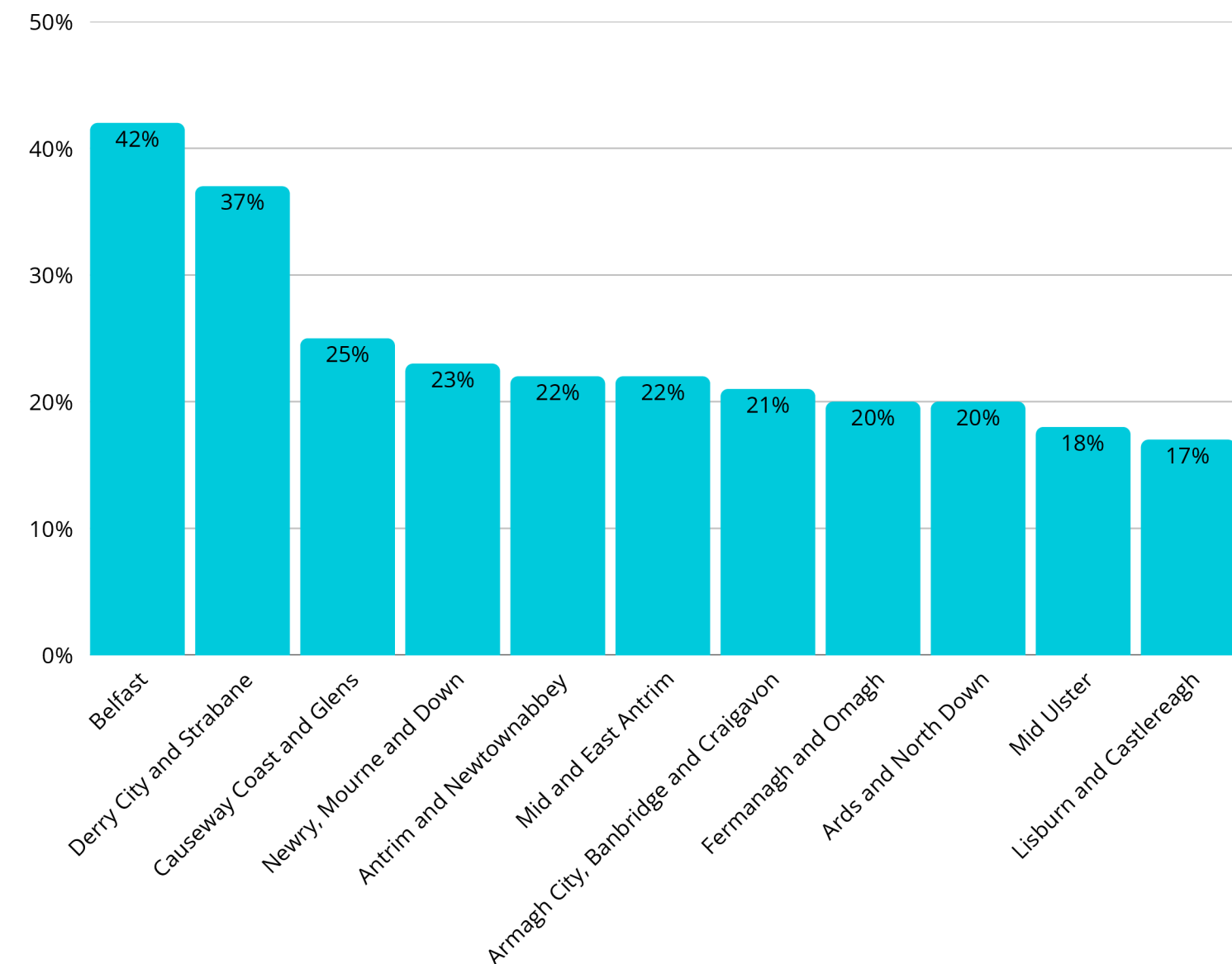
Note: This chart shows data for primary, post primary and special schools for pupils with known addresses. Data was not available at the DEA level for funded voluntary and private pre-schools, pre-school specialist provision in nursery schools, and pupils educated off site but not at school. Data was also not available at the DEA level for pupils with unknown / missing / invalid addresses.

Belfast Shows the Highest Levels of SEN and Deprivation Combined

Local Government District distribution of SEN pupils (by pupil residence) as % of total enrolments, 2024/25



Local Government District distribution of pupils entitled to free school meals (by pupil residence) as % of total enrolments, 2024/25



Note: This chart shows data for primary, post primary and special schools for pupils with known addresses. Data was not available at the LGD level for funded voluntary and private pre-schools, pre-school specialist provision in nursery schools, and pupils educated off site but not at school. Data was also not available at the LGD level for pupils with unknown / missing / invalid addresses.

Reliably Comparing UK SEN Rates is Difficult Due to Structural and Definitional Differences

Different systems use different definitions

- Each UK nation operates under its own legislation and terminology for additional needs e.g. Additional Support Needs (ASN) in Scotland, Additional Learning Needs (ALN) in Wales, SEN in NI and England).
- These categories do not map onto each other, so headline rates reflect different underlying concepts.

Data collection methods vary between jurisdictions

- Data collection methods vary, including whether jurisdictions record only a primary need or allow for multiple needs per child
- England records one primary need for each child, even if they have several additional needs; Scotland records several ASN reasons for a single learner.
- Northern Ireland historically allowed multiple descriptors through the dual-register system (medical + SEN), and now records SEN separately from medical conditions.
- Framework differences may significantly influence who is counted as having SEN.

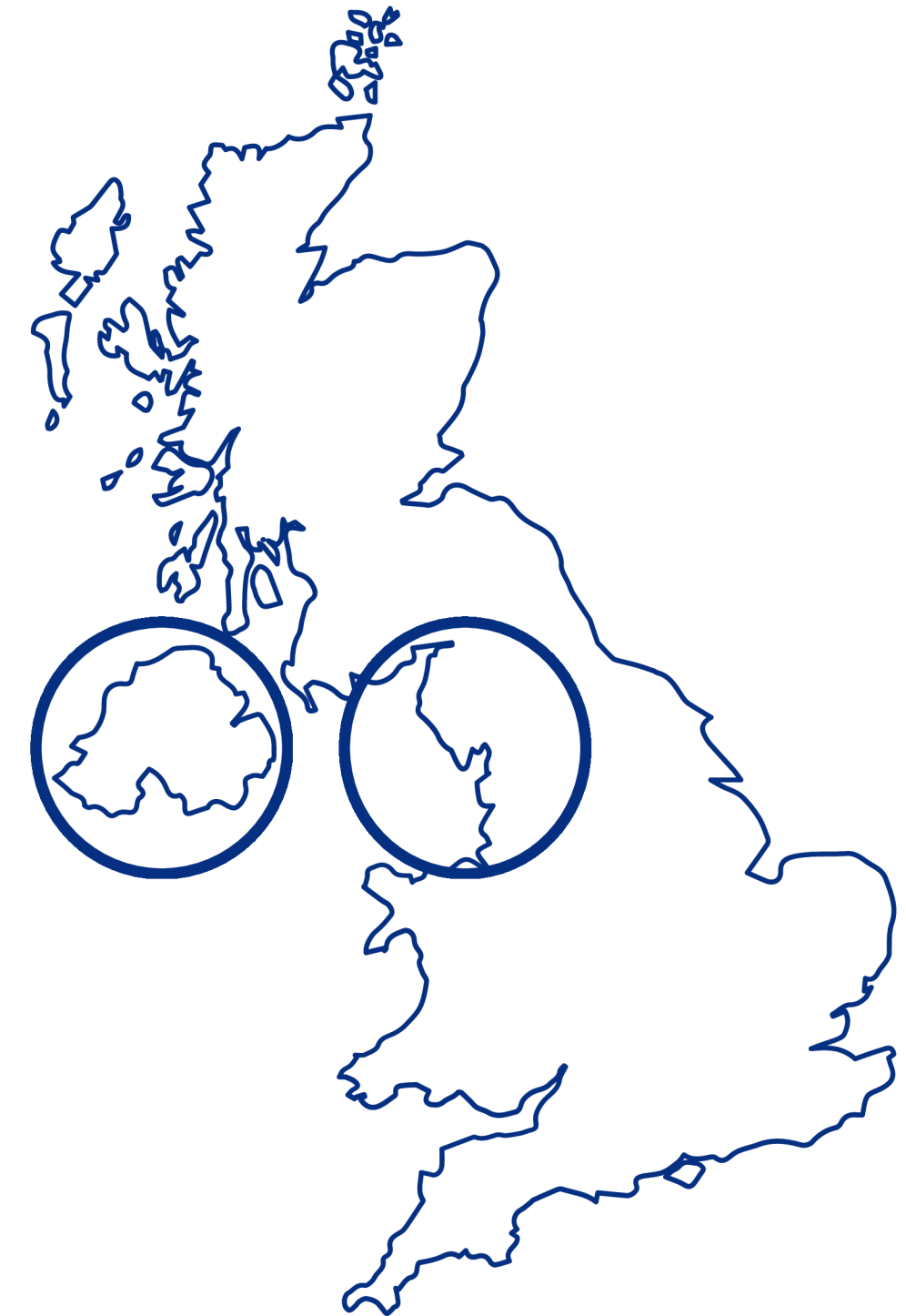
Identification frameworks are not aligned

- Northern Ireland uses a three-stage framework (Stages 1–3), with Stage 3 equating to a Statement.
- England uses SEN Support and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), while Scotland's ASN framework is broader and automatically includes some groups, such as looked-after children.
- These structural differences mean systems identify and record need in different ways.

When compared with demographically similar regions, NI's SEN rate are closer than UK-wide comparisons suggest.

While direct comparison is challenging, demographic data provides important context for understanding Northern Ireland's perceived high prevalence rate:

- When Northern Ireland, which has an overall SEN identification rate of 18%, is compared with a demographically similar region, such as **Northwest England** (17%), the difference in overall SEN identification is very small.
- This similarity suggests that population characteristics - including levels of deprivation, health profiles, and early childhood factors - contribute to the variation seen when Northern Ireland is compared to national averages elsewhere.





Northern Ireland
Assembly

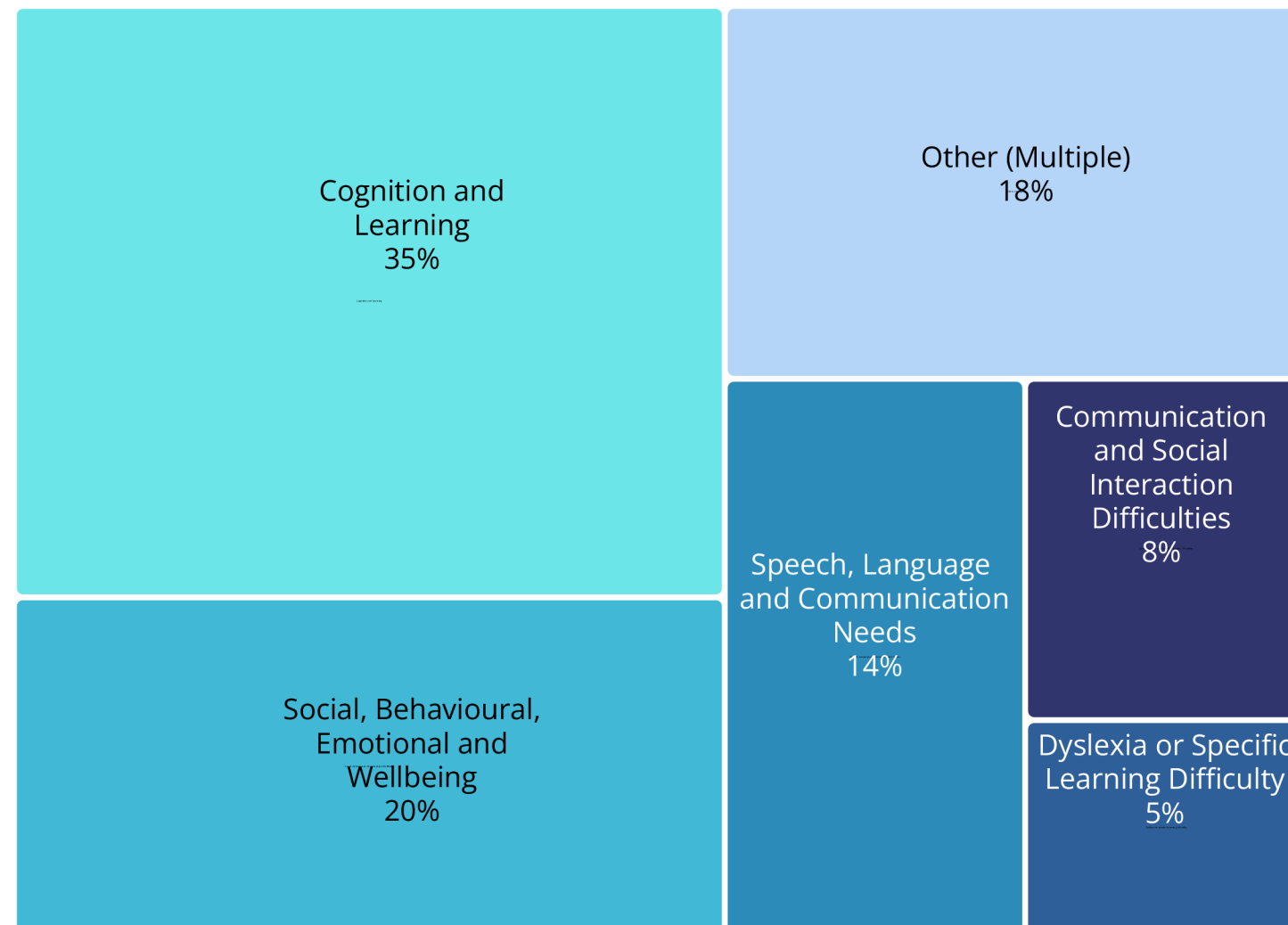
Part 2: The Profile and Classification of Need

Cognition and Learning Is the Most Common Category of Need

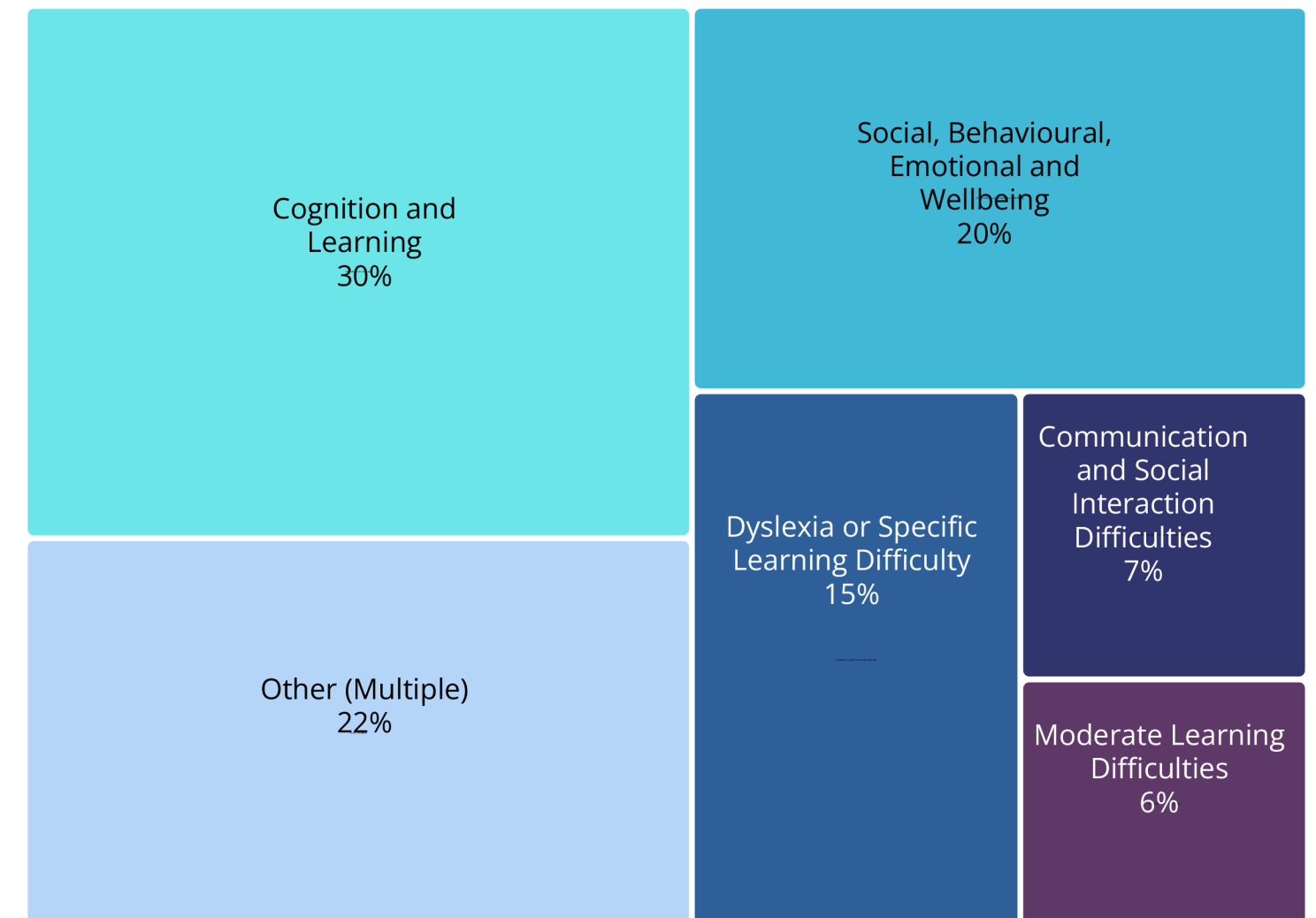
- All pupils with SEN are recorded under one or more of **five defined categories**.
- These categories help schools to identify priority needs, plan specific provision and monitor outcomes.
- The pupil profiles below demonstrate that needs are widely distributed, but **Cognition and Learning** accounts for the largest proportion of SEN profiles across both sectors.

SEN pupils presenting profile of needs, 2023/24

Primary Sector



Post primary sector



Five Overarching SEN Categories and Their Specific Needs

Each pupil's Special Educational Needs are recorded using an overarching category, which is then broken down further into specific types of need that describe the child's individual profile.



Cognition and Learning

- Difficulties processing, retaining, or applying information.
- Tasks may take longer; children may need visual prompts or simplified steps.

-
- Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD)
 - Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)
 - Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD)
 - Specific Learning Difficulty – (SpLD) i.e. dyslexia and Dyscalculia



Social, Emotional & Mental Health (SEMH)

- Challenges managing emotions, behaviour, or relationships.
- May struggle to stay calm, follow routines, or engage without support.

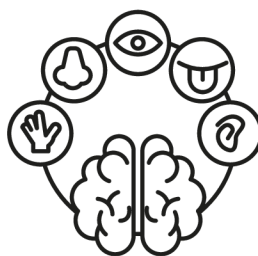
-
- Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)
 - Receptive Language Difficulties
 - Expressive Language Difficulties
 - Pragmatic / Social Communication Difficulties
 - Speech Sound Disorders (SSDs)
 - Stammering



Speech, Language & Communication Needs (SLCN)

- Difficulties understanding or using language to learn and interact.
- May need extra time to process information or respond.

-
- Emotional Regulation Difficulties (ERD)
 - Anxiety-related Needs
 - Depression / Low Mood
 - Behaviour that Challenges (BtC) – needs-based, not disciplinary
 - Trauma-related Needs
 - Attachment Difficulties



Sensory

- Difficulties with hearing, vision, or both.
- May struggle with sensory processing (e.g., light, sound, touch, movement).

-
- Hearing Impairment (HI)
 - Visual Impairment (VI)
 - Multi-Sensory Impairment (MSI)
 - Sensory Processing Differences (SPD) – hyper/hypo-sensitivity



Physical

- Mobility, movement, or medical needs affecting access to learning.
- May require adapted equipment or adjustments to move safely.

-
- Physical Disabilities (PD)
 - Neuromuscular Conditions (NMC)
 - Long-term Medical Conditions (LMC) that affect access to learning
 - Needs requiring Specialist Equipment or Environmental Adaptations

Specific needs within the five overarching categories

Why Distinguishing SEN from Disability Rights Matters

Defining the Terms

- Clarity between SEN (learning difficulties) and SEND (disability rights) is important, as misunderstanding this distinction can unintentionally lead to discriminatory practices.

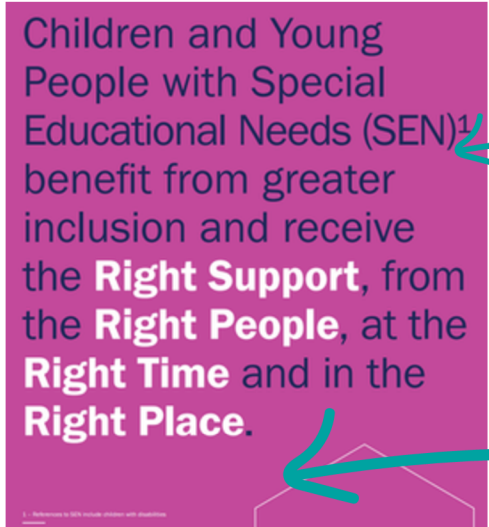
Term	Core Definition	Focus and Implication
SEN	Special Educational Needs: Defined as a learning difficulty requiring Special Educational Provision .	Focuses on educational barriers and the resulting need for provision that is additional to or different from usual teaching.
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability: Incorporates both SEN and disability equality duties .	Legislation, such as the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (NI) 2016, uses the term SEND to give equal weight to disability and SEN.

Why the Distinction Matters

- **Legal Significance:** Terminology has legal significance; terms like special educational provision and reasonable adjustments determine what support must be provided and what can be legally challenged.
- **Disability Rights:** Stakeholders note that the failure to sufficiently prioritise the 'D' (disability) in SEND has been linked to systemic patterns of disability discrimination.
- **Documentation across Northern Ireland remains inconsistent**, with SEN, SEND, and SEN/D often used interchangeably. The Reform Agenda recognises the need for greater clarity and consistency in terminology, although the initial Year One task to review this issue has been removed from the immediate priorities.

Variation in terminology across Reform Agenda documents

Example 1: excerpt from Reform Agenda Delivery plan (page 5)



Primary emphasis on "SEN" with disability referenced in the footnote.

Footnote text: 'References to SEN include children with disabilities'

Example 2: Cover page of the SEND Reform Agenda Outcomes Framework



Disability is referenced here but separated out from SEN term.

Clarifying the boundary between medical needs and SEN recording

The Importance of Correct Terminology

While a child may have a medical diagnosis, this does not automatically mean they are registered as having Special Educational Needs (SEN). Accurate terminology and consistent recording are essential to ensure the child receives the right support at the right time and that schools fulfil their legal responsibilities

When Does a Medical Condition Become SEN?

Under the current system, the presence of a medical condition - recorded separately on the Medical Register - only results in a child being placed on the SEN Register if that condition creates a learning difficulty requiring special educational provision

Historical Context

Historically, the Northern Ireland system used a dual-register system which recorded medical and SEN categories together, blurring this distinction and making SEN data less reliable. The Department of Education introduced separate Medical and SEN Registers in 2019/20 to improve consistency and accuracy in data recording.

This change also complicates longitudinal comparison, as trends before and after 2019/20 may reflect altered recording practices as much as genuine shifts in underlying levels of need



Example: Autism and SEN recording

- A child receives an autism diagnosis, which is recorded under the school's medical categories. The diagnosis itself does not automatically place the child on the SEN Register.
- If the child is able to access learning successfully with reasonable adjustments, no SEN category is recorded.
- However, if the child's autism begins to affect for example, communication, social understanding or emotional regulation, the school may then record SEN under SLC, SEMH or Sensory, depending on the child's individual profile.



Example: epilepsy and SEN recording

- A child with epilepsy requires a healthcare plan and ongoing monitoring. When seizures do not affect learning or participation in school, the child remains on the Medical Register only
- SEN is recorded only if the epilepsy creates barriers to learning, such as fatigue, difficulties with concentration or issues with memory.

The Legal Framework for SEN is Still in Transition

Legislation



- Education (NI) Order 1996 – Provides the statutory framework for SEN.
- SENO/Disability Order (2005) – Introduces disability discrimination protections and mainstream inclusion rights.
- SEN and Disability Act (NI) 2016 – Adds new duties, including:
 - Learning Support Coordinator in every school
 - Personal Learning Plans (PLPs)
 - EA-HSCT cooperation
 - Duty to seek child's views.

Statutory Guidance



- SEN Code of Practice (1998) & Supplement (2005):
 - Statutory guidance still in force.
 - Based on the Education (NI) Order 1996 and SEN Regulations (2005).
- Schools must continue to follow the Code except for areas where commenced 2016 Act duties now apply (e.g., 3-stage recording, child's views, LSC role).

Current practice and Status



The 2016 Act - some sections commenced; others require new regulations + new Code which must be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly.

New 3-stage system in practice:

- Stage 1 – School-delivered provision with PLP
- Stage 2 – School + external support
- Stage 3 – Statement of SEN

New Code is still draft - schools must follow the 1998 Code + 2005 Supplement, except for new staged recording.

Policy Updates - 2025 SEN Policy Statement sets out roles, responsibilities, and links to the reform agenda.



The system is in a transitional phase: some 2016 Act duties are live, but full implementation depends on new regulations and a revised Code of Practice.

Part 3:

The Evolving Sen System

The SEN Reform Agenda: A Five-Year System Rebuild

Development of the Reform Framework



2023–2025:
Framework Design

- SEN Reform Agenda and Outcomes Framework published.
- Initial transformation funding secured (PTSB allocation £27.5M).

2017–2023:
Evidence Building

- Multiple scrutiny reports and End-to-End Review published.

2025–2030:
Delivery Phase

- SEN Reform Delivery Plan 2025–2030 published.
- Five-year structure with 24 action areas.

Core Objectives of the Reform



- Strengthen early identification and timely intervention
- Improve the clarity, consistency and timeliness of statutory processes
- Enhance inclusion and the range of support models available
- Develop and support the workforce, including new tools and guidance
- Establish consistent measurement, data use and accountability across the system
- Ensure more coherent and coordinated support for children, families and schools



The ambitious five-year programme is advancing rapidly, with Year 1 actions already in motion. A robust tracking framework is needed to secure coherent and complete implementation.

Early Progress Has Been Made, but Key Enablers Are Delayed

Year One Immediate Actions

(Actions focused on delivering rapid improvements across key areas)

14 of 15 actions focused have commenced but most remain in the early stages of implementation

Key Actions Underway:

- Digitisation of the statutory assessment and review process.
- Streamlining statutory assessment process to ensure timely confirmation of placements.
- Publication and implementation of a child-centred Graduated Response Framework.
- Implementation of child-centred Local Impact Teams (LITs).
- Review of quality and appropriateness of specialist provision in mainstream schools including evaluation of Specialist Provision Early Years Foundation classes.



Delayed Action

- Task and finish group to examine Nomenclature around SEN

Year One Enabling Actions

(Systems needed to support long-term, sustainable reform)

Several actions central to building trust and communication have been delayed until 2026

Key Actions Underway:

- Outcomes framework and Policy Statement Published.
- Launch of enhanced advocacy service and a one stop website for parents.

Delayed to 2026



- Appointment of a SEN champion



- Establishment of Lived Experience Forums



- Launch of enhanced advocacy service



Funding Reality

Year one funding: £31.5M allocated (£27.5 Million from Public Sector Transformation Board, £4 Million from Early Learning). The SEN reform will require additional funding in the region of just over £100 Million per year each year for the next five years.

The New Graduated Response Framework Shifts Focus to Early and Flexible Support

What is the Graduated Response Framework (GRF)?

A structured approach that helps schools identify and support children and young people with SEN.

Purpose: To respond more flexibly to a continuum of need, enabling earlier intervention to prevent escalation

Alignment: Reflects models adopted in other jurisdictions, where the focus is on timely support rather than reliance on formal statements as the primary route to provision.

Key Principle: The views of the child and their parent are central to the cycle

The IPAMER Six-Step Cycle

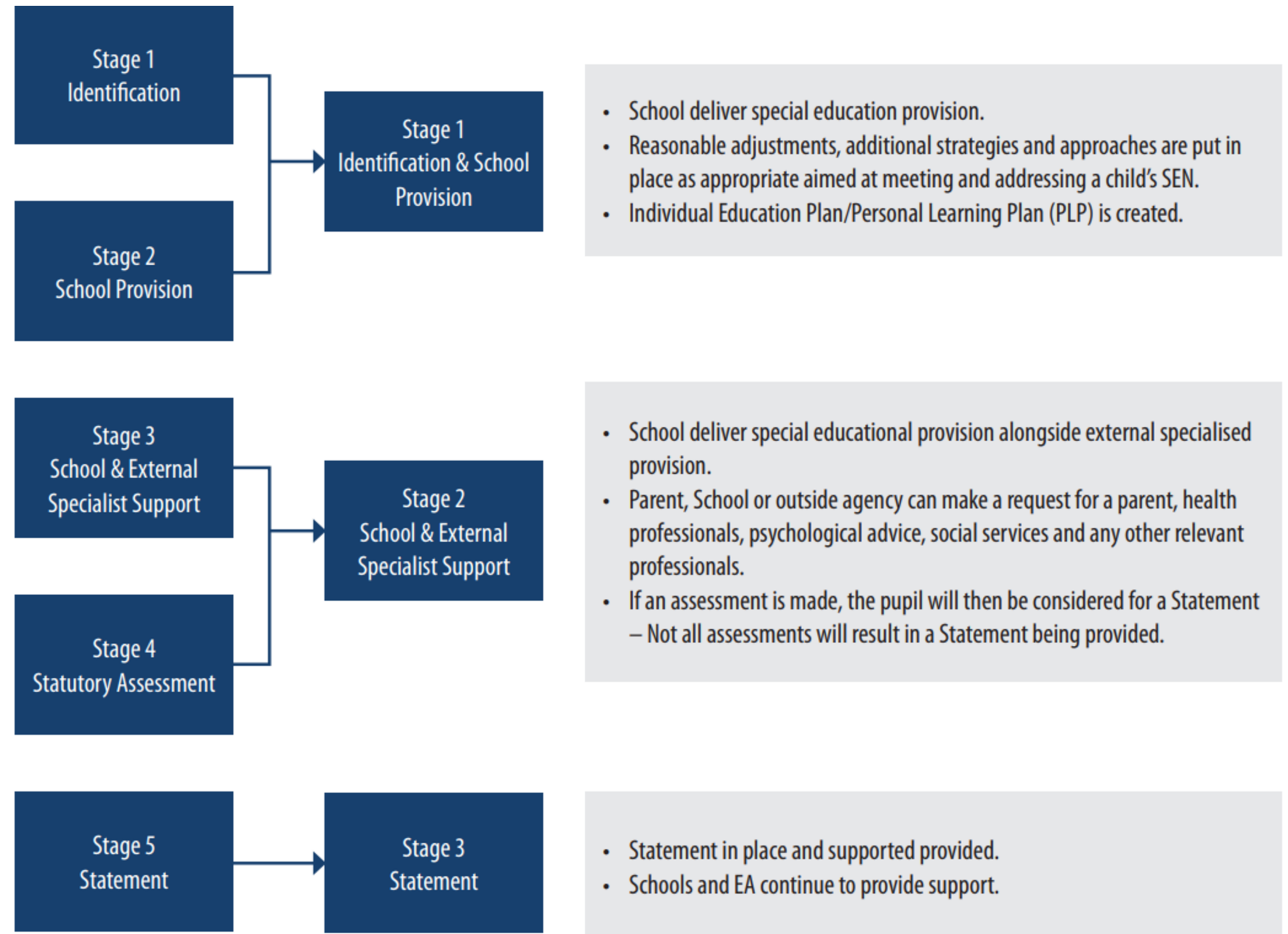


IPAMER is the engine of the Graduated Response. It is a continuous six step cycle for planning implementing and reviewing support.

Provision changes over time in line with monitoring evidence, the level of support can increase or decrease depending on the pupil's progress.

The Code of Practice is Moving from a Five to a Three Stage Model

- The current Code of Practice (1998) and its 2005 Supplement set out a five-stage system.
- The Draft Revised Code (2016) proposes a three-stage system, which many schools have begun to adopt ahead of formal commencement of the 2016 Act.
- The diagram shows how the five-stage system corresponds to the new three-stage model, as illustrated in the Department of Education's 2025 SEN Reform Policy Statement.



The New Framework Provides a Continuum of Support across Different Settings

Increasing level of support

Special School (highest specialist provision)

- Statement of SEN required
- Specialist teaching & therapeutic support
- For needs not met in mainstream/SPiM

SPiM – Specialist Provision in Mainstream

- Small-group specialist teaching
- Enhanced ratios & structured support
- For pupils needing more than mainstream

Mainstream with Stage 2 Support

- Remains in mainstream class
- Targeted interventions + HSCT/EA support
- Needs met with reasonable adjustments

Mainstream – Whole School Provision (WEP) / Stage 1

- Universal support & reasonable adjustments

Most needs met at Whole-School and Stage 1; more intensive provision only used when required.

Who decides on school places?

- The Education Authority (EA) makes placement decisions.
- Decisions follow statutory assessment/ based on multi-disciplinary evidence
- Placement can be made before a statement is issued.

What evidence is considered?

- Educational Psychology advice
- HSCT reports (e.g., SLT, OT, Paediatrics)
- School evidence (PLPs, progress, interventions, attendance, behaviour)
- Specialist assessments
- Parent and child/young person views

Legal test

A placement is agreed only if:

- The school can meet the child's needs,
- It does not impact the efficient education of others and
- It represents an efficient use of resources.
- (NI Order 1996 / Code of Practice)

The Graduated Framework in the Early Years: Early Intervention and Developmental Focus

Area	Application in Early Years
Identification	Relies on developmental milestones, such as communication, interaction, and early regulation. This requires strong partnership working with parents from the outset.
Universal Support	Support begins with universal, play-based practice focused on routines, relationships, and the learning environment.
Personal Learning Plans (PLPs)	PLPs focus on developmental outcomes, use shorter review cycles and emphasise adapting the environment, routines, and sensory supports before targeted interventions are introduced.
External Support	External pathways differ from those in school-age settings, involving earlier assistance from Health Visitors, Speech and Language Therapy (SLT), Early Years specialists, and Early Years Local IMPACT Teams. Multi-agency support can be accessed before the child reaches statutory school age.
Transition	Transition into primary school is a defined part of the framework, requiring planning, information sharing, and continuity of support into Stage 1 of primary.

Early Years Actions under the Reform Agenda

- The SEN Reform Agenda includes specific immediate actions related to this phase, such as the commitment to resource pre-school education settings to support early assessment.
- Funding, including £4m from Early Learning & Childcare, has been allocated to support pre-schools during statutory assessment processes

Reasonable Adjustments are a Core Legal Duty Within the Framework



What are reasonable adjustments?

Reasonable adjustments are changes that schools make so that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or disabilities can access education on an equal basis with other pupils. These adjustments remove barriers to learning and participation.

Examples include:

- Providing extra time for tasks or exams
- Using assistive technology (e.g., speech-to-text software)
- Adapting teaching methods or materials
- Making physical changes (e.g., ramps, accessible toilets)
- Offering support staff or specialist help



Legal framework in Northern Ireland

There is no uniform definition of what 'reasonable' means, this will depend on the context of the individual school setting as well as the needs of the child with a disability. However, Schools have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 (SENDO) which requires schools to:

- Avoid discrimination against pupils with disabilities.
- Make reasonable adjustments so these pupils are not disadvantaged.

Application within the Graduated Framework

Reasonable Adjustments are a fundamental component of support and are expected to be implemented at the lowest intensity level of the Graduated Response Framework. Reasonable Adjustments are a key part of Whole-School Provision (WEP), which is the high-quality, inclusive teaching and universal support provided for all pupils.

Part 4:

Support Structures and Provision Models

Frontline Support is Being Redesigned Through New Local Impact Teams (LITs)

The Local Impact Team (LIT) model



What they are:

28 locality-based teams created by the EA split across the five Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) boundaries. LITs bring together eight previously separate SEND support services into one coordinated system for pupils at stage 1 and 2 of the Code of Practice. The new teams became operational in September 2025 and are being introduced through Graduated Response Framework training.



Purpose:

To act as a single point of access for schools requesting specialist advice, guidance, and support for pupils with SEN.



Intended Focus:

To enable earlier intervention and proportionate support, often before a statutory assessment is required.

Access:



- Schools submit a digital Request for Involvement (RFI) application through the SENCo Portal to seek support. Each RFI is assessed individually through the flexible Support Pathway Framework, considering child, family and school factors and Graduated Response evidence to form a holistic, needs-led decision.
- The model allows concerns to be reviewed without needing a formal assessment first. LITs provide advice, consultation, training, and targeted support to school staff.

Demand for support

The introduction of LITs in September 2025 required a transition from the eight predecessor SEND support services to the new unified LIT model. During this transition, a substantial number of RFIs submitted under the old system were still active and had to be processed by the new LIT teams once they became operational. As a result the reported data is split into two separate time periods below:

Since launch (September 2025), LITs received:

- 1,256 Requests for Involvement (RFIs) (15 Sept – 23 Oct 2025).
- 2,108 RFIs (1 May – 23 Oct 2025), including those held during the transition period.

Cognition & Learning: category with the highest number of RFIs:

- 544 RFIs (15 Sept – 23 Oct), 415 accepted for support.
- 1,025 RFIs (1 May – 23 Oct), 811 accepted (116 awaiting allocation to a pathway).

Requests across other categories from 1 May to 23 October 2025 include:

- Social, Behavioural, Emotional & Wellbeing: 1,142 RFIs
- Language & Communication: 428 RFIs
- Sensory: 10 RFIs
- Physical: 21 RFIs

Local IMPACT Teams (LITs): Workforce Composition (Primary & Post-Primary)

*As of 30 September 2025, a total of **161.3 teacher-grade staff** are deployed across **20 School-Age LITs** operating within the **five HSCT areas**.*

Each school-age LIT must be able to deploy Teacher-grade specialist staff across five SEN specialisms:

- Cognition & Learning (C&L)
- Language & Communication (L&C)
- Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Primary Social, Behavioural & Emotional Wellbeing (Primary SBEW)
- Post-Primary Social, Behavioural & Emotional Wellbeing (PP SBEW)

Some school-age LITs also include:

- Intervention Officers
- Behavioural Support Assistants
- Classroom Assistants

Across the school-age system, the Northern Trust operates 5 LIT teams, the largest number of any Trust. Belfast, the Southern Trust and the Western Trust each have 4 school-age teams, while the South Eastern Trust has 3.

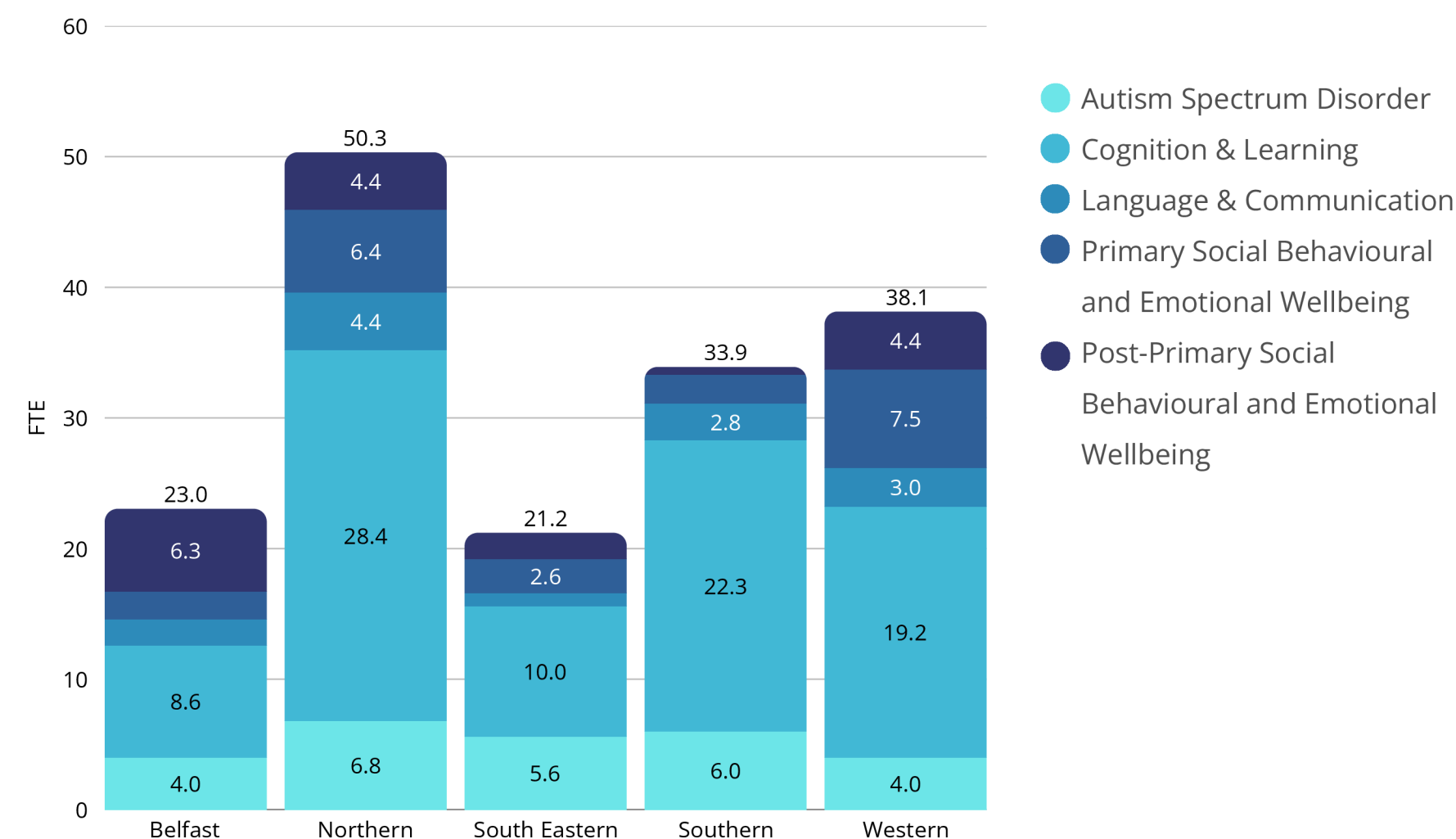
Leadership & Management:

- Each LIT is managed by a Senior Teacher or Assistant Advisory Officer (AAO).
- All LITs within a Health Trust area are overseen by an Area Manager (Advisor or Education Officer grade).

Qualifications:

- Most frontline staff are Teacher or Advisory Teacher grade.
- All Teacher-grade specialists must be fully qualified teachers with sufficient experience and/or relevant SEN qualifications.
- Variation exists in minimum qualifications because staff transferred from eight predecessor Pupil Support Services, each with its own requirements.

HSCT distribution of existing Teacher grade staff at Primary/Post Primary level by specialism across all 20 School-Age LITs as of 30 September 2025



Note: In addition to the below, a further seven FTE Social Behavioural and Emotional Wellbeing Assistant Advisory Officers are deployed flexibly across the LIT areas to carry caseload as required.

Local IMPACT Teams (LITs): Workforce Composition (Early Years)

As of 30 September 2025, there are **33.26 FTE specialist staff** deployed across the **8 Early Years LIT teams** operating within the **5 HSCT areas**

Early Years LITs have a different workforce requirement, reflecting the developmental and multi-disciplinary nature of early intervention.

Required Staffing

Each Early Years LIT must be able to deploy at least four Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Early Years Specialist Teachers.

Teacher Expertise

These specialists typically cover:

- Early identification of developmental delay
- Communication, interaction and early language needs
- Early cognition and learning needs
- Early social, behavioural and emotional development.

In the Early Years system, the Northern, Southern and Western Trusts each operate 2 LIT teams, while the South Eastern Trust has 1, and Belfast has 1.

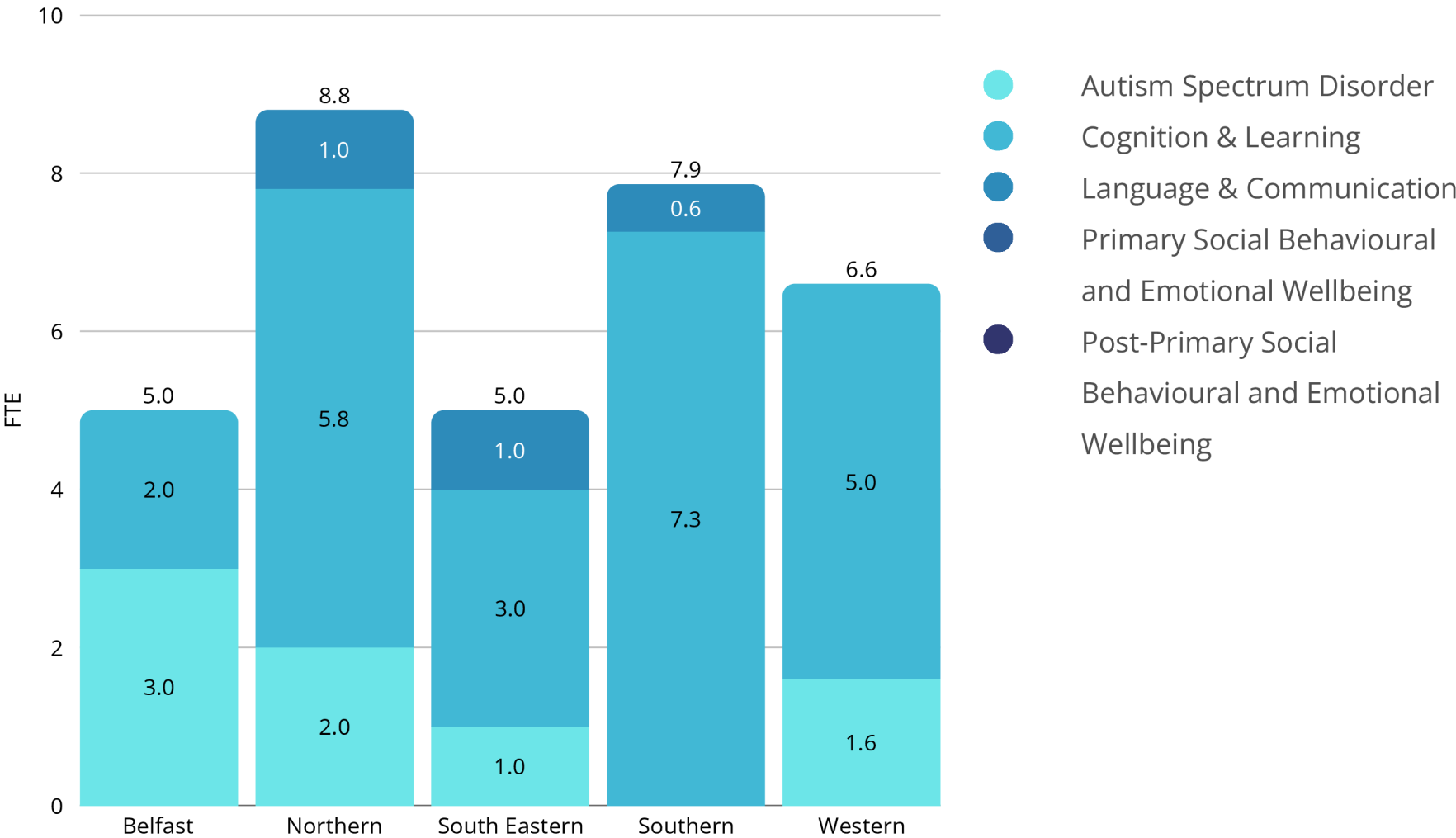
(While Early Years does not mirror the five school-age categories exactly, staff must collectively cover the core SEN domains relevant to early childhood.)

Additional Roles

Depending on legacy service structures, some Early Years LITs may also include:

- Intervention Officers
- Early Years Assistants or Support Staff.

HSCT distribution of existing Teacher grade staff at Early Years Level by specialism across all 8 LITs as of 30 September 2025



LIT Staffing Varies Widely Across Trusts, Implying Uneven Capacity in Specialist Support

Overview of LIT staff distribution across HSCTS

Northern Trust (NHSCT)

The Northern Trust has the strongest and most consistently staffed LIT teams in NI, with particularly robust capacity in Cognition & Learning.

Southern Trust (SHSCT)

Staffing in the Southern Trust is uneven, with generally solid C&L and ASD coverage but notable gaps in L&C and SBEW in some localities.

South Eastern Trust (SEHSCT)

The South Eastern Trust has broadly balanced staffing but pockets of shortfall where teams lack key specialists, creating internal variation

Western Trust (WHSCT)

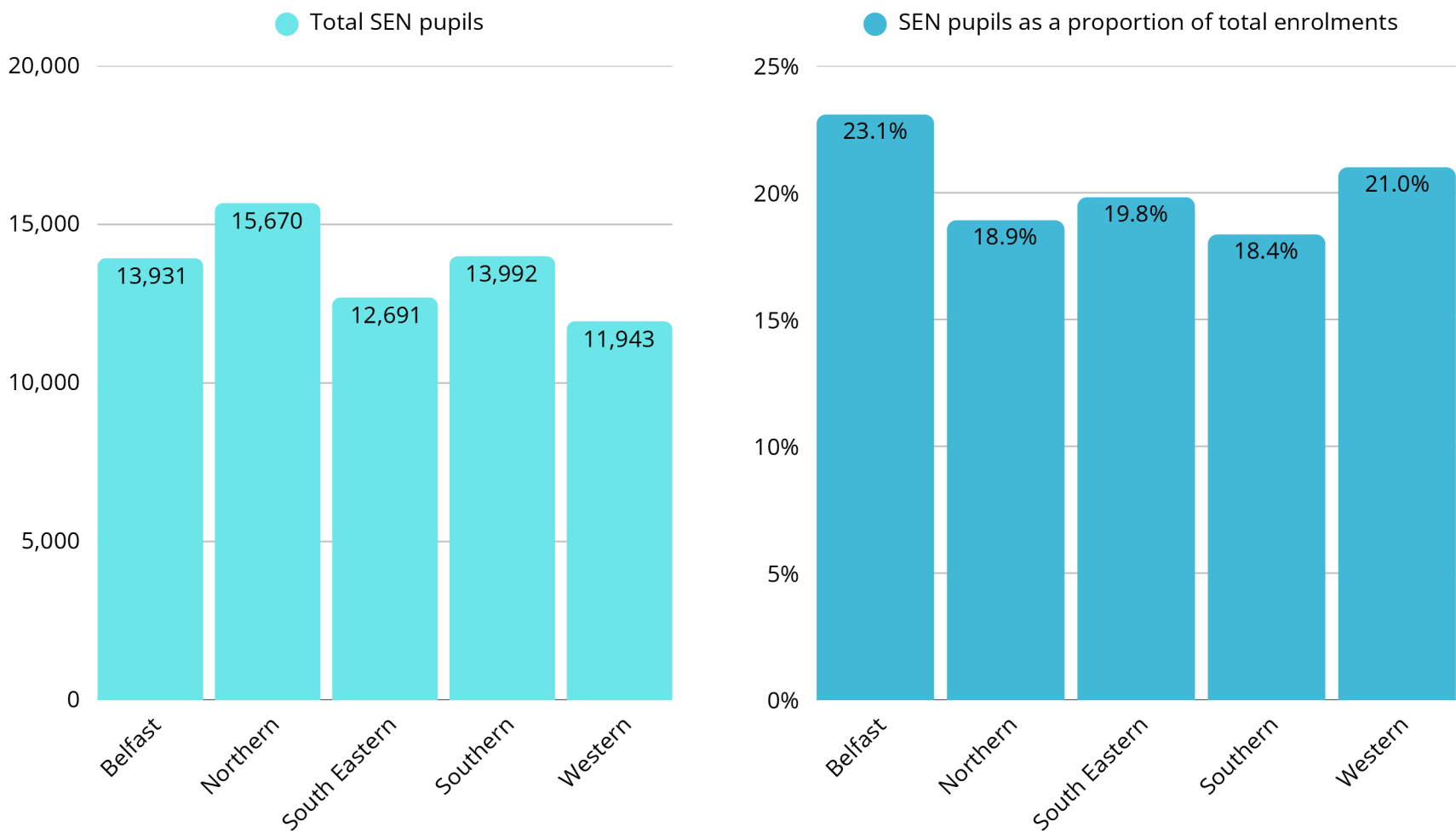
The Western Trust shows the greatest disparity, including some of NI’s best-staffed LITs alongside others with major gaps in ASD or L&C provision.

Belfast Trust (BHSCT)

The Belfast Trust has the lowest overall LIT staffing levels across the five specialisms, with some localities lacking ASD or L&C specialist teachers entirely. Capacity in SBEW is also limited in several areas,

The DE has advised that an additional cohort of approximately 30 FTE specialist teachers will also be required in order for the LiT Network to be at an operational capacity that is sustainable over the long-term.

How SEN pupils are distributed across HSCTs (numbers and proportions), 2024/25



Note: The charts above show data for primary, post primary and special schools for pupils with known addresses. Data was not available at the HSCT level for funded voluntary and private pre-schools, nursery schools, pre-school specialist provision in nursery schools, and pupils educated off site but not at school - these exclusions make up 3% of total enrolments, and 2% of all SEN pupils. Data was also not available at the HSCT level for pupils with unknown / missing / invalid addresses - these exclusions make up less than 1% of both total enrolments and SEN pupils.

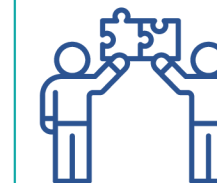
Specialist Provision in Mainstream Schools (SPiMs) has Expanded Rapidly to Meet Placement Demands

What are SPiMs

- Specialist classes within mainstream schools designed for pupils with Special Educational Needs whose needs go beyond what mainstream support can provide, but who do not require a special school placement.
- They offer smaller class sizes and lower pupil-teacher ratios and individualised learning. SPiMs also allow phased inclusion into mainstream. classes and reverse integration, where mainstream pupils can access SPiMs support.

Why They Expanded so Rapidly

- SPiMs grew quickly as part of emergency planning to address a shortage of special school places, particularly for early years and Foundation Stage pupils.
- As a result, new SPiMs were established across nursery, primary, and post-primary schools at pace.



Scale of Growth (2022-2024)

- 212 new SPiMs were created between 2022 and 2024 across 108 schools.
- By 2023/24, 3,830 pupils were enrolled — a 200% increase since 2018/19.
- Currently, there are 594 operational SPiM classes across 226 schools and several private nurseries.

Types of SPiM Provision

- Social Communication (SPSC) – 253.5 classes
- Specialist Learning (SPL) – 224.5 classes
- Early Years/Foundation (EYF) – 69 classes
- Speech & Language (SPSL) – 33 classes
- Other smaller categories include behavioural, hearing impairment, physical needs, and non-school early years provision.

SPiMs were established to address urgent placement pressures, resulting in rapid expansion and substantial variation in provision.

SPiMs Offer Flexible Support but Face Challenges in Placement, Staffing and Service Access

What Works Well

- ✓ Greater diversity and inclusion within schools.
- ✓ Stronger home-school relationships due to smaller class sizes.
- ✓ Local placements reduce travel stress for pupils.
- ✓ Focus on the emotional, social or academic needs of individual pupils as required.
- ✓ A great degree of flexibility in terms of the inclusion of pupils in mainstream classes, the balance of time spent between the SPiM and mainstream classes tailored towards the needs of each pupil.

Key Challenges Identified by Stakeholders

- 🚩 Stakeholders have identified a range of existing challenges with SPiMs implementation including:
- 🚩 Increasing complexity of needs within SPiMs, including more pupils with severe learning difficulties and complex needs.
- 🚩 Staffing and training pressures, including limited access to specialist behaviour support and insufficient training in autism, disability, and restrictive practices.
- 🚩 Limited access to Allied Health Professionals (speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy), often described as inconsistent and inadequate.
- 🚩 Communication difficulties with the Education Authority, including delays and unclear information.
- 🚩 Significant transition challenges, especially at key stage changes and at age 16.

Part 4:

Implications and Next Steps

Reform Opportunities and Risks

Opportunities

- The **Graduated Response Framework (GRF)** offers a more consistent, needs-led approach that prioritises early intervention and clarity for schools and families.
- **Revised staging and assessment processes** have the potential to streamline pathways, create clearer thresholds and reduce unnecessary referrals for statutory assessment.
- **LITs and multi-disciplinary models** could strengthen early support and reduce escalation if staffing levels and structures stabilise across all Trusts.
- **Better data and shared terminology** would support more robust planning, resource allocation and evaluation of reform outcomes.

Risks

- **Financial constraints** may limit the effectiveness of reforms or delay key enabling work such as training, data improvements and workforce planning.
- **Rapid expansion of SPiMs**, while helpful in meeting immediate need, may lead to long-term inconsistencies in provision if not aligned with strategic planning and quality assurance.
- **Inadequate workforce capacity** - both in LITs and across specialist provision - could undermine the implementation of the GRF and delay improvements.
- **Persistent variation across Trust areas** risks entrenching unequal access to support, particularly where staffing shortages coincide with higher prevalence.
- **Incomplete legislative transition** leaves schools operating across overlapping systems, potentially causing confusion and inconsistent practice.

Issues the Committee May Wish to Explore Further

- How financial pressures may affect the **delivery and pace of reform** and what options exist to ensure SEN services remain sustainable.
- The drivers behind rising Statements, including which categories of need are contributing most to growth and whether current pathways incentivise statutory assessment.
- How effectively **the Graduated Response Framework** is being implemented in early years and schools, and what support or training may be required.
- Whether **LIT staffing levels** adequately reflect the distribution of SEN across Trusts and what steps may be needed to address geographic imbalance.
- The long-term role and **sustainability of SPiMs**, including how their rapid expansion aligns with strategic planning for specialist provision.
- Opportunities to improve **joint working** between EA, Health and schools, especially in areas where therapy or behavioural support capacity remains limited.

References

[SEN and Medical Categories - Guidance for Schools | Department of Education](#)

[SEN Reform Agenda 2025](#)

[SEN Reform Outcomes Framework Jun 2025](#)

[SEN Policy Statement Aug 2025](#)

[SEN Reform Agenda - Delivery Plan 2025](#)

[Graduated Response Framework \(Primary & Post-Primary\)](#)

[Graduated Response to Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools \(Early Years\) 2024](#)

[Disability discrimination in schools in Northern Ireland](#)

[End to End Review of Special Educational Needs \(SEN\) | Department of Education](#)

[Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs](#)

[Supplement to the code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs](#)

[Northern Ireland Audit Office Special Educational Needs Report 2017](#)

[SEN Reform Agenda and Five Year Delivery Plan: Key Considerations from CLC – Children's Law Centre](#)

[Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions for Answer 34206/22-27 - the number of children who \(i\) have been referred for support from Local IMPACT Teams \(LiTs\); and \(ii\) have been accepted for literacy support, since LiTs were established.](#)

[Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions for Answer 34203/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to detail the number of vacancies in Local IMPACT Teams.](#)

[Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions For Answer 34102/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to detail the \(i\) number; and \(ii\) job titles, of individuals who make up the Local IMPACT Team Support Moderation Referral Panel.](#)

[34101/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to detail the criteria used by the Local IMPACT Teams Support Moderation Referral Panel, in the support overview scoring guide for allocations.](#)

References

Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions For Answer 33484/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to detail the current roles within each of the Education Authority's local IMPACT teams, including a breakdown of (i) each specific job role; (ii) the number of each role within a team; and (iii) current vacancies for these roles.

Northern Ireland Assembly Written Question 30988/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to outline (i) the staffing composition of a Local Impact Team; (ii) the training or qualification required to work as part of a Local Impact Team; and (iii) the terms and conditions of employment for workers employed as part of a Local Impact Team.

Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions 31020/22-27 - To ask the Minister of Education to detail why Local Impact Teams were not fully staffed and operational for the start of the new academic year.

Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions 32769/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of requests received from schools for support for (i) cognition and learning; (ii) social, behavioural, emotional and well-being; (iii) speech, language and communication needs; (iv) sensory; and (v) physical needs, in the last twelve months.

Independent Review of Special Educational Needs Service and Processes in Northern Ireland | Ipsos

Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions 29886/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to detail the number of children on the waiting list for a Statement of Special Educational Needs at the end of the academic year (i) 2020-2021; (ii) 2021-2022; (iii) 2022-2023; (iv) 2023-2024; and (v) 2024-2025.

Northern Ireland Assembly Written Questions For Answer 29795/22-27 To ask the Minister of Education to detail any action he is taking to rebuild relationships with the schools that do not believe they will receive the required special educational needs support from the Education Authority.

Parent / Carer Information Sheet – Children's Law Centre

To ask the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 33047/22-27, to detail (i) the amount of funding secured to progress early actions; and (ii) a breakdown of how the funding secured has been allocated to specific actions, in the SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan.

O'Connor, U., Courtney, C., Mulhall, P., & Taggart, L. (2023). The prevalence of special educational needs in Northern Ireland: A comparative analysis. European Journal of Special Needs Education, 38(4), 543-557