



Inquiry into a Strategic Review of Current SEN Provision and Transformation Agenda

Response from Carhill Integrated Primary School

1.About Us

Carhill Integrated Primary School, built in 1829, is located on the outskirts of Garvagh town. Our pupils not only come from Garvagh, but also from other surrounding towns and villages including Kilrea, Maghera, Swatragh, Glenullin and Bovedy.

In 1992, Carhill was the first controlled primary school in Northern Ireland to transform into an integrated school. Since 2010, we have nearly tripled our enrolment and pride ourselves in creating a nurturing environment for all children to flourish.

2. Our Response

Our response to this inquiry consists of two case studies that we have written to reflect, in our experience, what is working and not working in our education system in relation to ensuring that children with SEN access their right to an education that develops their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. We offer these case studies as examples from a small rural school in relation to both what is in the agency and power of schools to do and how some of our children continue to be failed by the system.

Case Study 1: A Child Failed by the SEN System in Northern Ireland

1.Background

"Child A" is a primary-aged pupil in Northern Ireland with a Statement of Special Educational Needs identifying behaviour as his primary area of need. Although he previously presented with moderate learning difficulties, recent educational psychology assessment indicated that these difficulties were no longer evident. His Statement was amended accordingly during the academic year.

Despite being a statemented child with complex behavioural needs, Child A has repeatedly experienced inconsistent support, delayed intervention, and systemic barriers that have led to a significant escalation in behaviour and emotional distress.

2. Early Support and Initial Concerns

Child A was referred to Primary Behaviour Support due to escalating dysregulation, aggressive outbursts, and an inability to engage in the mainstream classroom environment.

However, behaviour support interventions from October – December 2024, had no observable positive impact, and school staff continued to request urgent help as Child A's presentation worsened.

By April 2025, the school escalated concerns to a MAST (Multi-Agency Support Team) meeting, seeking agreement on next steps and exploring alternative provision such as EOTAS (Education Other Than at School).

3. Barriers to EOTAS Consideration

During the April MAST meeting, behaviour support advised that Child A could not be referred to EOTAS, citing his Statement's reference to moderate learning difficulties. This was amended following:

- The newly completed educational psychology assessment showing he no longer met criteria for MLD
- Amended documentation removing MLD as a need
- The school's ongoing reports of significant behavioural crisis

This contradiction created a systemic delay: Child A met the behavioural threshold for EOTAS consideration, yet his outdated paperwork was used to block access to appropriate provision.

4. Continued Deterioration

In the weeks following the April meeting:

- Child A's behaviour further deteriorated – resulting in a suspension from school.
- Our school made additional requests to behaviour support for urgent intervention.
- No effective strategies or new resources were provided.
- Staff reported increasing safety concerns and frequent disruptions to learning.

A second MAST meeting was scheduled in May due to the ongoing risk and unmet needs.

5.Second MAST Meeting and Professional Recommendations

During the May meeting:

- The Educational Psychologist recommended EOTAS as the next logical step, based on Child A's profile and escalating behaviour.
- Multi-agency agreement supported this assessment.

However, behaviour support created further barriers, this time linked to:

- Deadline sensitivities for securing a September placement
- Assertions that an Autism assessment should occur before EOTAS could be considered
- Administrative delays connected to the new academic year
- Restructuring of the Local Impact Teams in the new academic year meaning he may not be placed in Thornbury.

6.Administrative Completion but Final Rejection

The school proceeded to complete all required EOTAS paperwork, ensuring every section was thoroughly evidenced. Confirmation of receipt was issued. Shortly afterwards, a formal letter was received stating:

"A placement in EOTAS was not in the best interests of the child."

This contradicted:

- The educational psychology assessment.
- The agreed recommendation from the May MAST meeting.
- The school's ongoing professional concerns.
- Recorded evidence of unsuccessful interventions.
- The child's worsening emotional wellbeing and behaviour.

7.Impact on the Child

As a result of delays, contradictory decisions, and inconsistent inter-agency coordination, Child A experienced:

- Escalation of behavioural difficulties – further suspensions.
- Increased exclusion from learning.
- Reduced sense of safety and belonging.
- Exploration of reducing his day/week.
- Emotional dysregulation linked to unsupported needs.
- Loss of trust in adults and school systems.
- Significant disruption to educational continuity.

8. Professional Analysis

This case demonstrates several systemic failings:

1. Lack of Coherence Across Agencies

- Conflicting messages between behaviour support, educational psychology, and MAST led to delays and confusion.

2. Out-of-date Documentation Used as a Barrier

- Behaviour support referenced outdated Statement information, despite updated assessments.

3. Failure to Prioritise the Child's Needs Over Administrative Deadlines

- Decision-making was influenced more by placement deadlines and service logistics than the child's welfare.

4. Inadequate Behaviour Support

- Interventions were ineffective and no alternative strategies or resources were offered.

5. Contradictory Final Decision

- The ultimate rejection of EOTAS contradicted both assessed need and professional recommendations.

9. Conclusion

Child A's case illustrates how a pupil with complex behavioural needs, despite statutory protection through a Statement, can be left without suitable provision due to systemic delays, contradictory advice, and inconsistent multi-agency cooperation.

The result is a child whose needs remain unmet, whose right to an education is not being upheld and whose educational and emotional development is being harmed.

Case Study 2: The Impact of a High-Quality Continuous Provision in a P1 Class for Children with SEN

1. Introduction

We decided this year to pilot a straight P1 class with a smaller cohort, designed around high-quality continuous provision, enhanced adult-child interaction, and responsive teaching.

This pilot emerged at a time when:

- SEN needs are rising sharply, particularly in speech, language, communication, and autism.
- Schools are being asked to do significantly more with fewer resources and limited specialist support.
- The current SEN Consultation proposes models that risk moving toward standardised pathways, despite increasing complexity in learner profiles.

In this context, our model provides compelling, in-school evidence of how strategically structuring early years provision can dramatically improve outcomes, especially for pupils with SEN, without relying on new units or high-cost structural reform.

2. Rationale for the Pilot

Our pilot is responding to three emerging pressures:

2.1 A significant rise in early developmental delay

Particularly in expressive language, social communication, regulation, and sensory processing.

2.2 Composite classes and larger cohorts were not meeting need

Previous mixed P1/2 environments provided insufficient:

- 1:1 interaction
- Adult modelling of language
- Targeted prompting
- Differentiation within play and early numeracy

2.3 Evidence from research and practice shows that early intervention must be embedded in day-to-day learning

International and UK research consistently shows that early years' environments with rich continuous provision, smaller class sizes, and strong responsive assessment lead to better long-term outcomes, especially for children with SEN and communication needs.

Our pilot was therefore designed to demonstrate what happens when the class environment is designed around need, not bureaucracy.

3. We are implementing

3.1 A straight P1 class (no composite) with a reduced cohort size.

This has enabled:

- Higher adult-child interaction
- Consistent routines
- Better sensory control
- Predictability (key for autism)
- Staff knowing children deeply and planning responsively

3.2 High-quality continuous provision

Provision includes:

- Language-rich role-play and small world
 - Fine-motor and sensory development
 - Outdoor investigation
 - Numeracy and pattern-based areas
 - Mark-making and early writing spaces
- Each area was enhanced daily to target numeracy, vocabulary, social interaction, and regulation.

3.3 Embedded formative assessment

We use:

- In-the-moment observation
- Quick number checks
- Constant adaptation of provision
- Interventions timetabled into the curriculum week

3.4 Tailored 1:1 and small-group learning

The smaller cohort has allowed highly responsive, high-frequency support without removing children from their peers.

4. Evidence of Impact (Compared With Last Year's Cohort)

The pilot has produced measurable, observable improvements across key developmental domains. These gains occurred within weeks, not months.

4.1 Speech, Language & Communication

Children with significant speech and language needs and autism have showed rapid progress, surpassing expected developmental trajectories.

4.2 Gains have included:

- Increased expressive vocabulary
- Longer sustained interactions in play
- Improved joint attention
- Increased confidence in initiating communication
- More functional social language
- Better understanding of turn-taking and reciprocal communication

For some autistic pupils, the progress was described by staff as *“transformational in a very short period.”*

5. What this demonstrates

Children with complex communication needs thrive in well-structured play environments, not necessarily in specialised units or separate pathways. The quality of interaction matters more than the type of placement.

5.1 Numeracy Development

Formative assessment shows this P1 cohort is:

- Performing at a more advanced level than last year’s cohort at the same stage
- Demonstrating stronger early number sense (subitising, comparing, estimating)
- Applying mathematical language confidently within play
- Showing deeper conceptual understanding rather than rote recital

Why this matters...

High-quality continuous provision accelerates learning for all, including pupils with emerging cognitive or processing difficulties—reducing later need for intensive interventions.

5.2 Early Literacy & Pre-Writing

This year, our P1 pupils demonstrate:

- Mark-making far earlier and with greater confidence
- Stronger pencil control and stamina
- Greater phonological awareness
- Increased willingness to “write” during play
- Clearer concepts about print

Our staff report a noticeable leap in pre-writing skills compared with last year’s cohort.

Why this matters

Curricula that rely heavily on direct instruction without embedded play will disadvantage children with delayed fine-motor and language development.

5.3 Emotional Regulation, Wellbeing & Inclusion

Our pupils, especially those with autism, sensory needs, or attachment vulnerabilities, show:

- Higher engagement throughout the day
- Fewer emotional dysregulation episodes
- Better transitions
- Stronger peer relationships
- Increased independence

This mirrors well-established evidence that children with SEN do better in environments where they feel safe, known, understood, and not overwhelmed by noise, unpredictability, or crowding.

6. Why the Model Works (Evidence-Informed Analysis)

The success of our pilot aligns strongly with research underpinning early years and SEN best practice:

1. **Smaller groups = better language development and regulation**
Consistent with communication science and autism research.
2. **Continuous provision creates natural communication opportunities**
Children do not need to be “pulled out” to practise language — they use it functionally during play.
3. **Formative assessment in play identifies need earlier and more accurately**
This supports early intervention before difficulties compound.
4. **Predictable routines reduce anxiety and allow children with SEN to learn**
A straight P1 class provides stability that composites cannot.
5. **Tailored 1:1 support accelerates progress**

6.1 Our findings suggest key principles for policy design:

Investment should start in Early Years, not later structures

Our case study shows that:

- Children with SEN make rapid gains in a high-quality P1 environment
- Many barriers can be addressed early, reducing escalation of need
- Preventative models are more effective and more cost-efficient
- Early investment reduces demand on EOTAS, special schools, and units

Policy Recommendation 1:

Prioritise funding for high-quality early years teaching environments, small class sizes, and continuous provision — not only diagnostic pathways.

One-size-fits-all placement models will not meet need

The consultation proposes standardised pathways, but our evidence shows:

- Children progress best when environment + staffing + pedagogy align
- A small P1 straight class with continuous provision provided more benefit for autistic pupils than withdrawal-based support
- SEN does not require separate spaces; it requires high-quality, personalised environments

Policy Recommendation 2:

SEN support must remain flexible and contextualised to local school environments, not centralised into uniform structures.

Schools need capacity, not complexity

Our pilot required:

- No new infrastructure
- No new unit
- No specialised external programme

It required:

- Thoughtful class design
- Skilled staff

- The right environment

This is a cost-effective, sustainable model compared with high-cost proposals for structural expansion of SEN pathways.

Policy Recommendation 3:

Investment should strengthen mainstream class capacity – smaller classes, classroom assistants – rather than creating additional layers of bureaucracy.

The system must trust schools' expertise

Our pilot highlights that:

- School-led design produced better outcomes than any top-down structural change
- Teachers working responsively and relationally were the key success factor
- A well-designed mainstream environment is an effective SEN intervention

Policy Recommendation 4:

Embed flexibility and trust in schools, ensuring that SEN strategy enhances rather than constrains responsive teaching.

7.Future Plans: Longitudinal Tracking of Impact

We will track this cohort annually to monitor:

- Numeracy and literacy attainment
- Speech and language development
- Social interaction and regulation
- Wellbeing indicators
- SEN referral rates over time
- Need for specialist interventions

This will provide valuable local data to inform:

- The SEN Transformation Agenda
- Our Quality of Provision and Outcomes for Learners evidence
- ETI evaluation in future years
- Regional discussion on early years SEN models

8. Conclusion

This case study provides real evidence of what works in supporting pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland:

- Small, well-structured early years classes using high-quality continuous provision and responsive assessment lead to rapid, substantial gains – even for pupils with significant SEN needs.

Our pilot demonstrates that:

- Inclusion works when environments are structured correctly
- Early years investment prevents later crisis and escalation
- Schools are best placed to design provision suited to their learners

- SEN reform must prioritise capacity, flexibility, and early intervention, not uniform structural change

Both our case studies offer a powerful, practice-based contribution to the current SEN Transformation Programme and should be used to advocate for a system that trusts teachers, empowers schools, and focuses on early, relational, play-rich learning as the best foundation for every child.

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