

SEND leadership roundtable · 2026

Liquid Personnel

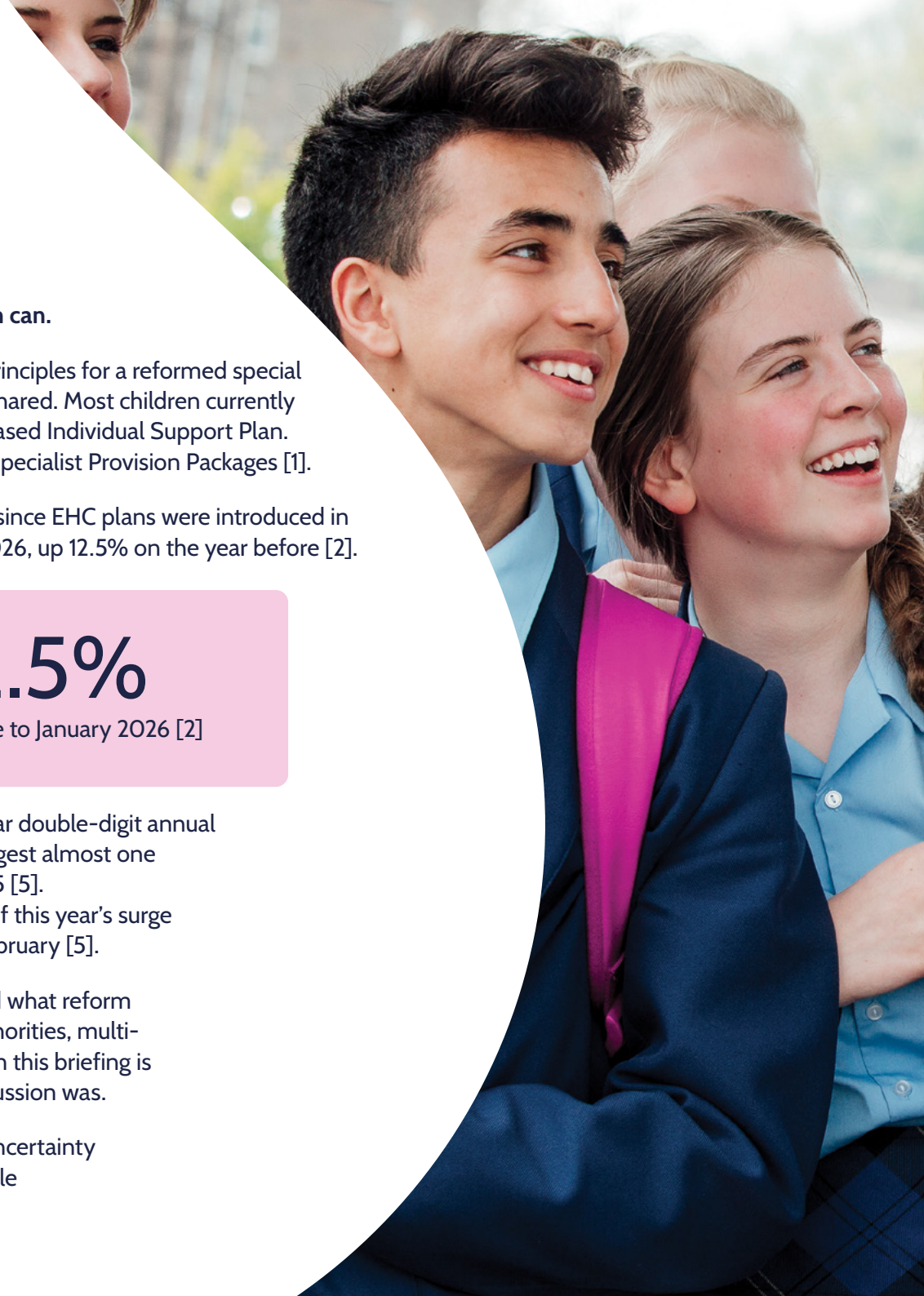
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The questions behind SEND reform

Insights from Liquid Personnel's SEND Leadership Roundtable

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Why SEND reform raises a delivery challenge



The ambition behind SEND reform is widely supported. The challenge is delivering it in a system where demand is already moving faster than the reform can.

England's schools white paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving, sets out five principles for a reformed special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system: early, local, fair, effective and shared. Most children currently supported by an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) will move to a school-based Individual Support Plan. EHCPs will stay in place for those with the most complex needs, backed by new Specialist Provision Packages [1].

The number of children and young people with an EHC plan has risen every year since EHC plans were introduced in 2014 [2]. The latest government data puts that figure at 718,800, as of January 2026, up 12.5% on the year before [2].

718,800
EHC plans active, January 2026 [2]

+12.5%
year on year rise to January 2026 [2]

That pressure hasn't waited for reform to land. Councils are now forecasting similar double-digit annual increases in EHCP numbers over the next three years and current projections suggest almost one in 10 school-age children could have an EHCP by 2029, up from one in 20 in 2025 [5]. Bill Revans, the County Councils Network's SEND spokesperson, has linked part of this year's surge in assessment requests directly to the government's reform announcement in February [5].

In July 2026, Liquid Personnel held a SEND Leadership Roundtable to understand what reform means in practice. It brought together leaders from parent carer forums, local authorities, multi-academy trusts, specialist provision, health-linked services and staffing. Nothing in this briefing is attributed to a named individual or organisation, in line with how candid that discussion was.

What we heard wasn't doubt that reform is heading in the right direction. It was uncertainty about whether the system has the time and capacity to deliver it as designed, while demand keeps building underneath it. That's the tension this briefing explores.

Question one

Can recovery and prevention be funded as one job, or do they need to be split?

Local authorities are working through unprecedented existing demand for EHCP assessments, annual reviews and plans while trying to shift towards the earlier, needs-led support the white paper asks for. Many are doing this with caseloads growing faster than capacity does. Councils now project EHCP numbers could reach one in 10 school-age children by 2029, up from one in 20 in 2025 [5].

What we heard at the roundtable

One school inclusion leader put it directly: resourcing recovery and prevention equally isn't realistic, and only committing fully to prevention improves either one. Splitting attention and funding evenly between the two doesn't produce two half-successes. It keeps the whole system in recovery mode.

That leaves an open question about the children already waiting, some for years, while the system builds a better front door for new referrals. A child in Year 3 today could face a lengthy wait for an assessment and by the time support is agreed, could be starting secondary school, with their needs having evolved significantly.

A separate contributor added an important caveat: early intervention shouldn't be read as early years only. A child who's been failed by the system can still need that support at 13 or 16, not just at five.

46.1%

of new EHC plans issued within the 20-week statutory timeframe, 2025, down from 46.4% in 2024 [2]

26.6%

of EHC needs assessment requests refused in England, 2025 [2]



Question two

Where will the specialist workforce come from?

Experts at Hand aims to bring specialist education and health expertise into mainstream settings earlier, before a statutory assessment becomes the only route to support. The principle was welcomed. The concern was capacity. Educational psychologists take around seven years of training, supervision and experience to build, and funding can't speed that up on its own.

What we heard at the roundtable

The concern wasn't only that there are too few specialists. Rising demand pulls inexperienced practitioners into complex, independent casework before they're ready. An unwritten norm of two years' supervised experience before taking on locum work quietly disappeared under financial pressure, and newly qualified practitioners moved into complex casework without it.

The concern wasn't limited to educational psychology either. Speech and language therapy and occupational therapy face similar workforce constraints, even though they get less policy attention and are tracked less consistently in national data.

Underneath this sits a wider shift in the market itself. Specialists now have more control than employers over how and where they work, moving between local authorities, health, independent practice and agency work. In a profession this short-staffed, that leaves employers competing on pay rather than shaping the market.

How Liquid approaches this

Educational psychologists build experience through supervised group work before taking on complex, independent casework alone. Full-time EPs working with Liquid also get free, monthly group supervision from an independent, British Psychological Society-trained facilitator, the kind of supervised development that's often the first thing to go when a market is under pressure.

Our network runs to 200+ Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)-registered professionals and 400+ wider SEND specialists, spanning educational psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy. Last year alone, our specialists worked over 17,500 days across 30+ local authorities, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and education settings [4].



1:480
pupils per EP, best-served areas [3]

1:9,400
pupils per EP, least-served areas [3]

Question three

Is the sector sacrificing quality to increase capacity?

Roundtable participants gave direct examples of inconsistent plan quality: reports that echo what a school already knew, weak advice and, in the worst cases, EHCPs which appeared highly standardised, raising questions about how individual needs were evidenced and reflected. Fewer than three quarters of mainstream school leaders currently agree their school can support children with SEND effectively [1].

What we heard at the roundtable

The clearest distinction was between assess-and-leave models and relationship-based models, where a specialist knows the child, school and local context well enough to come back and check whether their advice worked. Local authorities under the most pressure often feel they have no real choice but the assess-and-leave route, even when they can see its limits.

Remote assessment came up too, and the roundtable was careful to separate the method from the standard. Much of an EHC needs assessment is data gathering, rather than a clinical procedure that requires the specialist to be in the room. Remote assessment isn't, in itself, a quality problem. The real question is whether the specialist has enough current, accurate information, and whether they're clear about when a case genuinely needs an in-person visit.

Where advice lacks sufficient detail or clarity, the impact is often felt later through additional assessments, disputes, or delays in securing appropriate provision. This impacts the child as well as the system. A plan that's too thin or too generic gets revisited and rewritten within a year or two, so the local authority pays twice for something that should only have needed doing once, properly. Nationally, council SEND deficits are already forecast to rise from around £3bn to £8bn by 2026/27 [6], and appeals to the SEND Tribunal have risen eightfold in a decade [7]. Getting it right the first time isn't just better for the child, it's the cheaper option too.

How Liquid approaches this

Every EP and specialist we place is fully vetted and HCPC-registered before they ever work with a school or family. Our own governance and safeguarding processes keep that standard in place for as long as they work with us. The professional judgement in a report is rightly the practitioner's own — the standard, experience and support of the person writing it is ours to answer for.



<75%

of school leaders feel confident supporting SEND effectively [1]

Question four

Can commissioning models change fast enough to make a difference?

Experts at Hand funding is routed through local authorities for shared specialist support, but how each area organises that money is still a live decision. Whether to commission locally, or combine budgets regionally for a bigger shared pool of specialists, is a genuine trade-off. There isn't yet a track record either way.

What we heard at the roundtable

Some areas are already pooling their Experts at Hand budgets on a bigger, regional footing. One contributor questioned whether that works in practice: a major city and the smaller boroughs around it can face very different pressures, and a single regional model risks treating them as if they were the same.

There's also real concern for existing specialist providers, some of whom fear losing work if local authorities are told to bring services in-house. One multi-academy trust (MAT) described building its own multidisciplinary team, and ran into a knock-on problem: pay privately for a specialist, and the local health system doesn't always know to backfill that role, so the wider system loses sight of where demand really sits.

Whichever way this settles, the question underneath it stays the same: does the model reflect how different an area's needs are, or does it average them away?

£1.8bn

Experts at Hand funding, over three years, through local authorities [1]



Question five

Should external providers build capability, or simply provide capacity?

External providers get called in because statutory services are under pressure. Some will simply supply capacity for as long as the market stays short. Others use the same position to help the organisations they work with build capability, so they need less external support over time and can build more sustainable models for the future.



What we heard at the roundtable

One MAT SEND lead stated that providers that work poorly have an obvious incentive to keep working that way, since weak early support pushes more children toward crisis-level assessments later. Doing the work well was described as the genuinely moral choice, because it means a school needs that support less over time, even though that runs against what keeps a contract going.

There's also a coherence problem with workforce supply. A trust might commission its educational psychology from one provider and its speech and language therapy from another. Getting support from one joined-up source is a different proposition to piecing it together from several unconnected suppliers.

How Liquid approaches this

One roundtable participant, with two decades of senior SEND leadership across multiple local authorities, said Liquid stood out as one of the more forward-thinking organisations in the sector, willing to think broadly and stay open to new approaches.

We want to build on that as the joined-up option: one provider covering educational psychology, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, working to one plan.

- Build trust-wide inclusion strategies, not just fill single roles
- Train and mentor SENCOs and school leadership teams, so schools rely less on us over time
- Deliver targeted assessments and interventions across EPs, SALT, OT and clinical psychologists
- Support complex cases through ongoing consultation, not one-off visits
- Flex delivery to fit you: a specific block of work, or an ongoing team that scales down as your capability grows

Where this leaves the system

Reform sets a clear direction, but delivering it depends on capacity, workforce and commissioning decisions that are still being worked out in real time, while demand and system pressures keep rising underneath all of it.

None of this is a reason to doubt where reform is heading. It's a reason to think carefully about the partners you rely on to support delivery, whatever stage of that journey your organisation is at, and to make that decision based on a strong evidence base.

The checklist that follows is a starting point for that conversation. It's a set of questions worth asking about anyone you commission to help you deliver.



What does good look like?

A checklist for commissioning external SEND support

External support is now a fixed part of how statutory and non-statutory SEND work gets delivered. The variation is in the quality of that support, not in whether it exists.

A weak assessment or a generic plan doesn't save time or money. It gets revisited and rewritten within a year, so the same work gets paid for twice.
This checklist sets out what to look for when commissioning external SEND support, whatever route you're using to get it.

1. Early intervention capability

- Can the provider work with a child before a statutory assessment is triggered, not only once one is?
- Is non-statutory, school-based support offered as its own service, not a scaled-down version of statutory work?
- Can support flex from a single consultation to an ongoing relationship as needs change?

2. Workforce depth

- How do they support newly qualified practitioners before they take on complex casework alone?
- Is each specialist backed by a wider team and a structured supervision model, or working in isolation?
- Do they invest in ongoing supervision and development, or only in placing people?

3. Assessment and plan quality

- Can they explain how they decide when a remote assessment is appropriate, based on the case rather than convenience?
- Are plans built from a full, structured account of the assessment, not a standardised or generic template?
- Within the period they're engaged, will they check whether their advice worked, or does contact end when the report is delivered?
- Can they show evidence of outcomes or delivery performance from past work, not just intentions?

4. Commissioning fit

- Is specialist support joined up across your trust or area, or is each school buying separately?
- Does the model reduce how much support you need over time, or depend on you needing them indefinitely?
- Are governance and safeguarding standards for external specialists as clear as those for internal staff?

5. Reform fluency

- Do they understand the current direction of SEND reform well enough to help you plan for it, not just react to it?
- Can they flex between statutory and non-statutory delivery as funding routes or requirements shift, without you needing a second supplier?
- Do they bring perspective from across the sector, or only from their own caseload?

Liquid Personnel's SEND team offer a complimentary conversation to talk through what good support should look like for your context specifically.

Review the areas creating the greatest SEND delivery risk

Bring this checklist to a conversation with Liquid Personnel's SEND team. In a complimentary conversation, we'll help you:

- Understand where the greatest pressures and risks sit within your SEND provision
- Compare your position with what other local authorities, trusts and schools are seeing
- Identify practical next steps to strengthen delivery

Speak to our specialists:

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All roundtable material in this briefing is anonymised. No participant or their organisation is named or directly quoted.



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