

## **SEN Units and Resource Bases Briefing**



### **Findings from parent carer focus Groups about SEN units and resource bases - England Only**

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#### **Introduction**

SEN units or resource bases can be best described as specialist facilities within mainstream settings that provide additional support for children and young people who have Special Educational Needs (SEN). It is important to note however that there is not a universally accepted definition of SEN units or resource bases.

The Government has been clear in its intention to increase the number of SEN units and resource bases. This is reflected in stated policy aims and significant funding commitments, including the £740 million High Needs Provision Capital Allocation, intended to support the creation of 10,000 new SEND places and specialist facilities within mainstream schools.

Contact conducted a series of focus groups to capture the experience of parent carers who have children who either currently attend a unit or base or have done in the past, as well those who have considered this type of placement for their child.

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#### **Summary of Findings**

Contact conducted 4 focus groups in late summer 2025 comprising of 30 Parent/Carers with children ages 4 to 19 who have Special Education Needs or additional needs.<sup>1</sup> The participants all

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<sup>1</sup> These parent/carers had children with a wide range of disabilities, including complex physical, social and emotional and learning disabilities. The children discussed attended both locally maintained schools and

had personal experience of SEN Units and resource bases as their children are either in attendance, have attended this type of setting or they have considered this type of setting for their child's education.

The discussions revealed significant inconsistency in how these units operate, particularly regarding inclusion. While some parents described positive experiences where their children were fully integrated into mainstream classes with targeted support, others reported units functioning as “holding cells” that isolated pupils and offered little or no teaching or specialist help.

Parents highlighted poor awareness and inconsistent terminology around SEN units, making it difficult to find suitable placements. The process of securing places through EHCPs was often slow, exacerbated by limited placement spaces, and lacking transparency. Experiences of support varied widely—from well-resourced, flexible provision to underfunded hubs without qualified teachers or adequate therapy input.

Many parents described segregation from mainstream peers, limited social opportunities, and exclusion from activities. Communication between parents and schools also differed significantly, with some feeling listened to while others felt unsupported

Across all focus groups, there was strong agreement on the need for national standards and government oversight to ensure consistency, inclusion, and quality. Parents called for better advertising, clearer guidance, and investment in both SEN units and specialist schools to meet all children's needs.

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## **Findings in Greater Detail**

### **Choosing placement**

A few parents were made aware of SEND units through a local authority list when seeking a suitable school for their child. One parent said they had first learned about SEND units when the local authority provided a list of schools, which included units alongside mainstream and special schools. This was a new concept for her, as they had not previously heard of such units despite being a teacher.

The importance of the local offer published by local authorities, which should list specialist provisions including units, was highlighted. However, parents said that SEN Units and resource bases are under-advertised and under-utilised compared to mainstream and special schools.

Parents discussed the lack of standardised terminology for units, which can make it difficult for parents to identify available options. Parents noted that once they found one unit, they were able to discover others, but general awareness among parents and even teachers is low.

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Multi Academy Trusts. The focus group took place over a two-week period starting on 25<sup>th</sup> August to Friday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025. The participants in the sessions were based in various local authorities across England.

One parent expressed surprise at learning that the unit was considered mainstream rather than specialist, despite requiring an EHCP for admission, highlighting the need for clearer classification and communication to parents.

One parent looked at a primary mainstream resource base unit for her son; however, her son would not be able to join the base until year one and there was no guarantee he would get a place. She believes there should be specific criteria for attending a resource base. She did not want to leave her son in a mainstream school which was not her first choice without the guarantee of a place within its specialist unit after year R, which could not support his needs and was not her first choice and therefore she did not apply for the school. She says it's a shame as she believes units are a fantastic idea.

### **Selection Process and Parental Choice for Placement**

For one parent the enhanced resource unit was their first choice for their child, as it offered a blend of mainstream learning and additional support. The decision was made after visiting several schools and finding the unit to be the best fit for their child's needs. This parent described a relatively straightforward process for securing a place in a SEND unit, with the EHCP specifically naming the unit. Others said they faced more difficulties in finding suitable placements and getting units named in EHCPs, with the process becoming slower and more competitive due to limited spaces. One parent clarified that their child's EHCP named the specific unit, not just the school, which ensured targeted support. This was seen as an important element.

Another parent explained how the school is named in her daughter's EHCP but she's also one of the unit's students and the unit is named in Section F of her EHCP.

Some parents were not given a choice as to whether their child attended a unit. One parent was told if her son did not go into the unit then he would be expelled, and this would look very bad on his record. Another Parent told us that he had many other schools in mind for his son, but he had been refused because of limited capacity. He said "we don't have choice. We just need to take it".

### **Support and learning experience**

Tailored Support and Staffing was described. A parent explained the unit's staffing model, where LSAs worked specifically with children in the unit, providing individualised support and allowing for flexible movement between mainstream and unit settings based on each child's needs. Support in the unit included tailored one-to-two support and flexible arrangements for children to access both mainstream and unit activities. The unit featured a dedicated building attached to the school, offering a well-resourced environment and a sensory room, which enabled children to participate in activities outside the mainstream classroom and facilitated tailored learning experiences. The flexibility of their unit allowed for individualised pathways.

One parent explained how her daughter is supported to attend all her classes in the mainstream setting whilst also receiving tailored interventions from the unit itself. 'She has some classes where the staff

from the center will drop in partway through to see how she's doing, but with other set lessons like English or Geography, where there's a lot of writing, then there'll be someone from the unit in the classroom with her'. The parent talked about how her child can go back to the unit if she needs a break as well as the support she receives there including a weekly counselling session with a neuro-affirming counsellor, a well-being session, a mentoring session and speech and language therapy.

Several parents have told us that the level of support their child receives has not increased as a result of attending a resource base or unit. They still receive the same support they had when in the mainstream population, with the only difference being they are now part of the unit. In some cases, this has meant that they can go and use the space and resources in the unit when they feel like they need to. In others, parents have told us that they are receiving the same support but have now been effectively segregated entirely and are only taught in the unit without any support. One parent whose child is currently attending a resource base said 'its really sad my child doesn't really get support, and he can't see his friends now he is in a unit'. Another parent told us that 'there is no extra support in the unit'.

Several parents noted that units and hubs are only as good as the teachers and there needs to be investment in specialist teachers if the number of units are going to increase.

One parent told us that her son is in year two, he is in a hub and has been since the start of school. She told us that "The hub he's in has never had a qualified teacher teaching the class. There is only a teaching assistant and a lunch lady.... I feel they're more like a daycare provision than a school." She also said that the mainstream school constantly move teaching assistants in and out of the hub so there is no consistency. This is preventing her son from progressing. She is currently going to tribunal to get a specialist placement.

Another parent told us how she had purchased equipment and resources for the hub, including a sensory light, sensory toys and dark blackout tents as they didn't have them or the funding to get them. This parent also organised for a specialist teacher to come and do some training to upskill the teachers in the unit as they have not got this skill set.

A parent told us that there is a lack of SALTs, only 11 hours for the whole mainstream school and this is incredibly insufficient for the wider school let alone the hub.

Some SEN units just seem to act as holding cells for those who exhibit challenging behaviour or have complex needs which are difficult to meet in the mainstream system.

### **Inclusion and school community -**

Variation among units with regards to inclusion was highlighted with some offering only unit-based instruction and others integrating children fully into mainstream classes.

A parent acknowledged the excellent academic progress for their child in the unit, but highlighted challenges in socialisation due to a small peer group and the distance the school was away from their

home. The school was out of area. These factors influence their decision to transition to a special school for greater social opportunities.

One parent told us that because his child is in a unit he can not see his friends. Many parents expressed that these resource bases and units are not integrated. In one case a parent told us that the unit was off site of the mainstream school. We frequently heard that those in a unit were effectively kept separate from the wider school community with different breaktimes and lunch times. This often prohibited them from seeing their friends. Some parents referred to SEN Units as a 'babysitting service' or a 'holding cell'. One parent told us that the children in these units are 'not part of the wider community'. She said it is such a bizarre notion, and this segregation would not be acceptable in the workplace.

Participants shared concerns about the lack of true inclusion for children in SEN units, describing how separation from mainstream peers and activities led to social isolation and a sense of difference that was harmful to their children. It was also noted that some children in resource bases were excluded from extracurricular activities.

One parent spoke of the true inclusion her daughter experienced as a student who attended a resource base in a mainstream school. 'She is a pupil at that school, and the unit is there to facilitate their engagement and inclusion in the mainstream school. The unit's not there for them to be at the unit and occasionally go into the mainstream school.' She said, 'our daughter would be a part of the school, and the unit would be there to support that rather than a place for her to go where she spends all her time.'

This parent told of how her child's best friend is in the mainstream school and the unit has an open-door policy, so her friend is welcome anytime. She also told us how her child was included in all the school trips and when the unit conducted its own trips her daughter was allowed to bring a friend from the mainstream school.

Another parent whose son is in a unit told us that 'he can't integrate with mainstream' as there are not enough staff to support his needs when he is in a classroom of 30. This parent also said that it would be hard for him to integrate without significant support as her son is non-verbal. She believes that he should be in a specialist setting.

A different parent spoke of her child who has dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia and sensory processing disorder and was denied a place in the resource base. While he has not got the support he needs, she is glad he is not in the base as "the children weren't integrated in it at all. The kids from the mainstream speak about the resource base children in really derogatory ways. they don't join in with anything." She looked at it for her other son but decided that it wasn't the right setting. Another parent said that children in units were treated like "second class citizens", labelled as 'naughty'.

Another parent told us of how children in the SEN Unit are sort of separate to the mainstream, although they're part of the mainstream school, they don't join the mainstream school. The majority of children in the SEND unit stay there all day. They've got a separate play area.

## **Communication and partnership with parents**

Some parents described strong communication with unit staff, regular involvement in EHCP reviews, and feeling listened to. The importance of direct communication with unit staff was discussed. One parent explained that all parent-teacher meetings were conducted with unit staff, including the SENCO and LSAs, rather than mainstream staff, ensuring focused discussions on their child's progress and needs. For one parent regular communication was maintained through meetings, email, and phone calls, especially when their child began using school transport and the unit staff were supportive during transitions, such as moving to a special school. She participated in annual EHCP reviews and was able to request emergency reviews when a change in placement was needed. The involvement of a dedicated SEND officer facilitated co-production of the EHCP and smooth transitions.

Other parents also reported mutual communication, feeling supported, and positive impacts on their children's academic progress, though some noted less flexibility in communication depending on the school.

Others reported limited parental input and a lack of support from schools and units. These parents also noted that that support was inconsistent and often depended on the parents' own knowledge and willingness to challenge school decisions.

One parent talked about an excellent relationship with the head of the unit and how she talks to her if there are any issues and the head of the unit then relays it to wider school staff. This is a system that works and should be replicated.

### **Is there anything you would like to see improved or changed in the way the resource base operates or are there examples of good practice you've seen that you think should be replicated elsewhere?**

All of the participants in the groups highlighted significant variation in the quality and type of support provided by different SEN units, with some units offering minimal support and others being more effective. Overall, a lack of standardisation was noted. There was a united call for clear guidelines for how SEN Units must work.

Participants agreed that more standardisation and clearer policy guidelines are needed to define what units should offer, while maintaining flexibility to meet diverse needs. A parent suggested that local areas could provide a range of unit types to cater to different support levels.

Several parents suggested that establishing clear criteria or checklists for SEN units could help ensure a minimum standard of support, including access to professionals such as speech and language therapists and opportunities for social integration.

The need for better advertising and transparency, with suggestions for policy improvements to ensure consistency and informed parental choice was also emphasised .

Lack of Consistency Across Units was flagged as a significant problem that requires urgent rectification. Parents agreed that units differ greatly in their approach, resources, and integration with mainstream classes, making it difficult to compare options and find the best fit for their child.

There needs to be greater knowledge, information and advertising of units. the confusion among parents regarding the existence and classification of units was repeatedly highlighted.

Parents who had positive experiences of SEN Units called for resource bases to be recognised as an important part of the support spectrum for children with SEN, through consistent development and advertising of these settings.

One parent highlighted the importance of the relationship between the head of the school and the head of the unit. She said that in her school this is strong. “They talk and communicate, everyone knows that my daughter is part of the unit, so everyone is on the same page’

All participants in the focus groups emphasised the importance of having teachers that had specialist training, understanding and empathy.

Several parents noted that there must still be a place for specialist settings. Several parents noted that SEN Units are acting as pseudo special settings as there are not enough specialist placements and this must end. It is important that specialist schools are invested in as well as Units. Units were not intended to take the place of special schools. One parent spoke to this saying “my son is 5, non-verbal and autistic. He doesn't have an awful lot of understanding. He is in a SEN unit within a mainstream school. This SEN unit has got nine classes. There's one special school, and its full. The best I could do was get him in this SEN unit because they wanted to put him in the mainstream school, nonverbal, in nappies and with no understanding.”

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## **What needs to happen?**

As a result of the experiences shared in these focus groups, Contact is calling for:

1. The government needs to establish and publish national standards for SEN Units and Resource base to end the disparity in the quality of teaching, resources, support, inclusive practice and parental experience.

These standards must mandate the statutory need for:

- The clarification of names and definitions across government, local authorities, multi-academy trusts, and schools to ensure national consistency and allow for accountability,
  - Resource bases must be given a designated status showing that they have skill, training and resources to support those with a specific type of need. This will stop the practice of creating a base without resources which is nothing more than a room to be sent to.
  - There must be qualified teachers in units as well as specialised teachers that provide interventions needed.
  - Regular access to input from professionals such as speech and language therapists
  - A fully developed inclusive culture where students are not segregated except for tailored timed interventions
  - Unit students must be able to access extracurricular activities, including trips and clubs.
  - All bases must be advertised in the local offer, and all teachers should be taught about SEN units in Mainstream schools as part of ITT.
  - The resource hub needs to be integrated within the school. The hub should not be separated in location.
  - There must be an expectation that teachers in the school need to communicate with the head of the unit to ensure a unified approach.
  - All staff in the unit must regularly communicate with parent carers of the children they support. They must discuss their progress any issues and support the parent in talking to staff outside of the unit when necessary.
2. Investment is needed in to ensure units are resourced appropriately and fulfil their purpose
  3. Contact is clear that SEN Units should never be used as a cheaper alternative to specialist settings and investment must be placed into specialist settings so that all needs can be met.
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## About Contact

Contact is the national charity for the UK's two million disabled children and their family carers. Families face a constant battle to secure the help they need – a battle that costs time, income, relationships, and wellbeing.

On average, parent carers lose £21,174 in household income each year, with 62% reducing or giving up work entirely due to caring responsibilities.

We're here to make sure every family feels valued, supported, confident, and fully informed every step of the way. We make this happen in three powerful ways:

- **We guide and inform:** Our trusted advice and practical support help families navigate everything from health and education to finances and wellbeing.
- **We connect families:** Through family events and online communities, we bring parent carers together to share experiences and exchange advice, and lift each other up.
- **We create change:** We empower families to speak out, campaign, volunteer, and shape the services that matter most.

Last year, Contact:

- Helped 381,000 parents with our [trusted advice and information](#)
- Amplified the voices of over 14,000 parent carers via [our campaigns](#) and local influencing work
- [Boosted the incomes](#) of eligible families by an average £ 5,538 a year.

Freephone helpline 0808 808 3555

[Contact: the charity for families with disabled children](#)

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