

# SEND Provision in England: Survey Report

JANUARY 2026



Photo Credit: Mazur - CBCEW



Catholic Education Service  
Since 1847



# Executive Summary



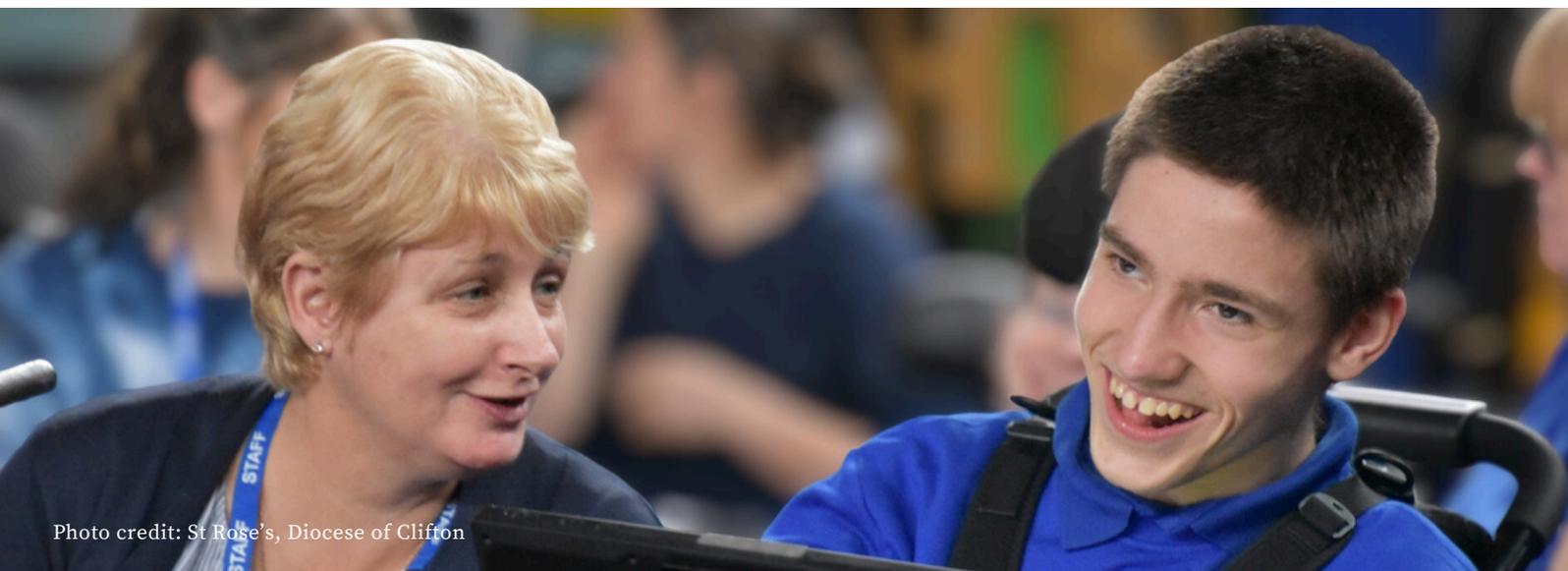
Catholic schools in England have a long and distinctive tradition of welcoming children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Rooted in the conviction that every child is created in the image and likeness of God, this commitment to inclusion is both theological and practical. It manifests in the daily life of Catholic schools: in classrooms that accommodate difference, in pastoral systems that prioritise dignity, and in the professional dedication of staff who see their work as a vocation.

Key findings from our survey include:

- **Significant delays** in Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessments;
- **Declining access** to specialist services such as speech therapy and educational psychology;
- **Serious recruitment and retention challenges** for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENDCos);
- **Growing financial pressures** as mainstream schools are required to fund provision that local authorities can no longer fully support.

Despite these challenges, Catholic schools continue to act as anchor institutions within their communities. They combine pastoral commitment with academic rigour and provide a model of inclusion grounded in values of compassion, solidarity, and faith in human potential.

This report concludes that reform must begin from a shared principle: that every child, irrespective of background or ability, possesses inherent dignity and value. The CES remains ready to work with policymakers to ensure that the national SEND system reflects that truth in law, policy, and practice.



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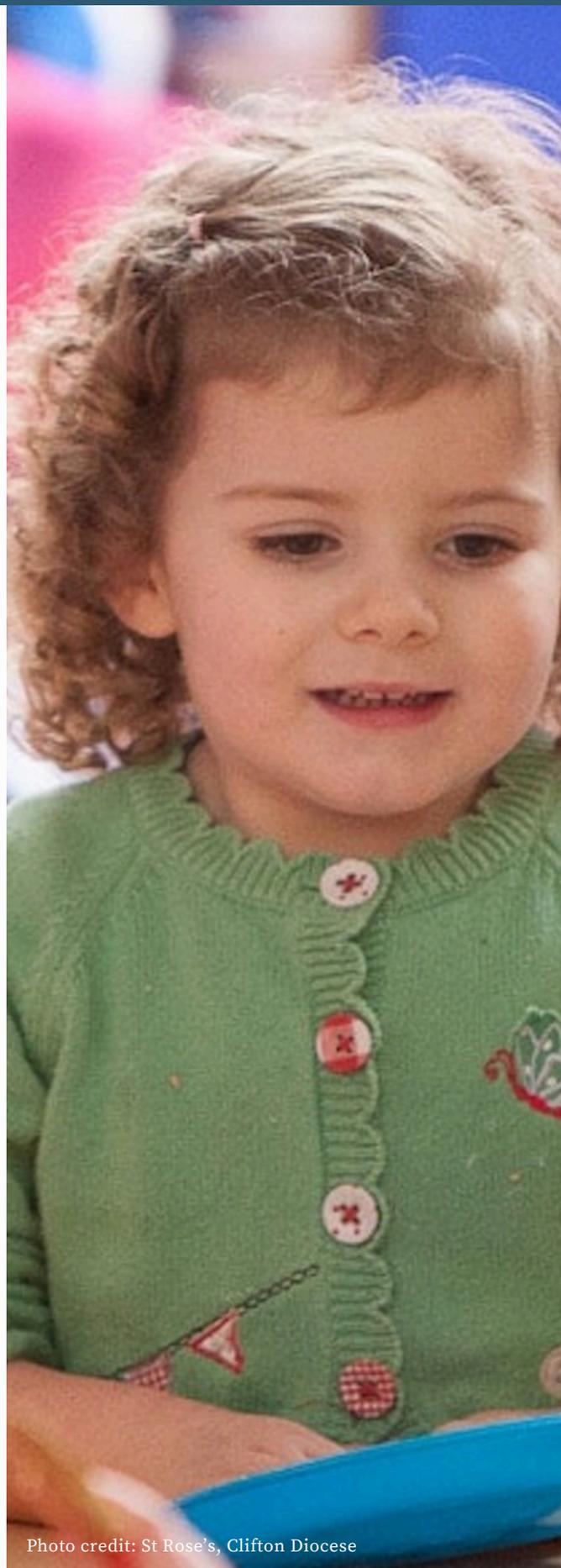


Photo credit: St Rose's, Clifton Diocese

# Introduction



***In recent years, special educational needs and disabilities have become one of the most pressing issues in English education. The number of pupils with identified SEND has risen to over 1.7 million, representing nearly 20% of the school population. More than 600,000 of these pupils have a legally enforceable Education, Health and Care Plan, entitling them to bespoke support from local authorities***

For Catholic schools, this is a policy challenge as well as a moral and pastoral one. The Church's involvement in education is guided by an unchanging principle: that every child is made in the image of God and therefore has a right to an education that allows them to flourish. This belief has informed Catholic engagement with SEND since the earliest Church-run special schools of the twentieth century. Today, the Catholic sector comprises just over 2,000 maintained schools and academies in England, serving over 805,000 pupils, and continues to welcome children of all abilities and backgrounds.

The 2025 SEND Schools Survey was designed to build an accurate, data-led picture of the reality on the ground. The survey reached a large and representative sample of Catholic primary and secondary schools.

The results show that schools are deeply committed but very stretched. Catholic schools demonstrate that a strong moral ethos can sustain inclusion however, they also make clear that goodwill cannot compensate indefinitely for systemic shortfall.

This report has four aims:

- To document the lived experience of Catholic schools in delivering SEND provision;
- To set that evidence within the wider national context of policy and funding; and
- To articulate the distinct contribution of Catholic education to the national conversation about reform.
- To demonstrate how local partnerships deliver value.



Photo Credit: Mazur - CBCEW

# The Theological Context



**The Catholic approach to education begins with a simple conviction: that to educate is to enable human flourishing.**

In the words of *Called to Flourish in Faith and Hope* (Catholic Education Service, 2024), “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” This vision defines the Church’s educational mission and its understanding of SEND. Every child, regardless of intellectual ability, physical capacity, or social background, is called to fullness of life.

## **The Human Dimension: Families, Teachers, and Trust**

Church teaching defines parents as the primary educators of their child, with schools existing to serve parents in this need. Catholic schools’ engagement with parents, often through pastoral relationships rather than formal advocacy, reveals a pattern of exhaustion and disillusionment.

## **The Principle of Dignity and Inclusion**

Catholic education is rooted in the belief that each person possesses an inherent and inviolable dignity. Inclusion is therefore not a charitable act or discretionary policy, but a moral imperative. Canon law articulates this responsibility clearly: Catholic schools must “pay regard to the whole person, so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society.”

This theological foundation gives Catholic schools a unique lens through which to view SEND provision. The focus is not just on overcoming deficit or disability, but on cultivating the gifts and potential present in every child.

# The Theological Context



## The Five Realms of Flourishing

The framework set out in *Called to Flourish* identifies five realms that together define a flourishing school: **Mission, Formation, Communion, Gifts, and Fruitfulness.**

- **Mission** affirms that education serves both the individual and the common good.
- **Formation** emphasises growth in knowledge, virtue, and personal responsibility.
- **Communion** underscores relationship—between teacher and pupil, school and family, community and Church.
- **Gifts** recognises the diversity of talents and abilities within each person.
- **Fruitfulness** speaks of outcomes—not merely academic attainment but the holistic wellbeing and joy of each child.

This model provides a philosophical anchor for educational reform, ensuring that policy decisions remain grounded in an understanding of human worth rather than administrative expediency.

## Catholic Education and the Common Good

The Catholic school is an institution that serves the wider community, often in areas of social deprivation where families rely heavily on schools for pastoral and practical support. Catholic schools' commitment to SEND provision is an extension of their service to the common good.



Photo Credit: Mazur - CBCEW

# The Role of Catholic Special Schools



Catholic schools have a long and proud history of educating children with special educational needs and disabilities. Many of England's earliest non-maintained special schools were founded by Catholic religious orders, rooted in the conviction that each life possesses sacred worth. This mission continues today across ten Catholic special schools in England and Wales, alongside numerous mainstream institutions that maintain approved SEND units or hubs.

Although numerically small, Catholic special schools represent a significant reservoir of expertise. Their success derives from an integrated model that unites educational, therapeutic, and pastoral care within a coherent spiritual framework. This approach reflects the Church's understanding that true education concerns not only cognition but formation.

Local authorities frequently commission non-Catholic pupils to attend Catholic special schools because provision is of a high standard and often unavailable elsewhere. However, these schools remain underrepresented in national policy discussions and datasets. Some academic research and official analyses have even overlooked their existence, leading to distorted conclusions about the role of faith-based education in SEND.



# St Rose's Catholic Special School: A Case Study



St Rose's is a non-maintained, all through school in Stroud, Clifton Diocese, for students with special educational needs and disabilities. St Martin's, a special college for those aged 19-25, is also based within the school grounds.

Over a hundred years ago a child with special needs, who could not be accommodated in a parish school, was left with the Dominican Sisters of St Rose's Convent in Stroud. This led the Sisters to found St Rose's School in 1912 – one of the very first special schools in the country.

As well as meeting students' educational potential, enabling independence is a key part of the curriculum, teaching life skills such as nutrition, money management and time management, while wheelchair-accessible transport provides opportunities for trips to go shopping, ice skating, and more. Other activities students enjoy include horse riding, yoga, and swimming in the St Rose's hydrotherapy pool.

In the past students enjoyed trips to Stoke Mandeville Stadium, birthplace of the Paralympic Games, to watch and participate in athletics events. Some have gone on to take part in national and international sporting competitions, including winning the London Mini Marathon wheelchair race.

After sixth form, students used to leave St Rose's and go on to other secular special colleges elsewhere. This led to the establishment just over a decade ago of St Martin's, a residential college built on the school grounds which includes a work-related learning and careers programme, work experience placements, and mentoring.

Students also have physical and health needs that are more challenging than in the past. Advances in medical technology have improved survival rates of preterm babies and children after severe trauma or illness.

Principal Sheila Talwar said: "Our aim is to help each of our students recognise their unique worth in the eyes of God. The value our students bring to the world and the part they play in society cannot be measured, they really are quite amazing in what they achieve.

"Our students never cease to amaze me. From learning to walk, to learning to use a communication aid, to running a tuck shop or learning phonics, the students are endlessly determined and creative in the ways they learn and develop. What our students do on a daily basis is phenomenal."



Photo credit: Gavin Crilly for The Stroud Times

# Findings from the Catholic Schools SEND Survey



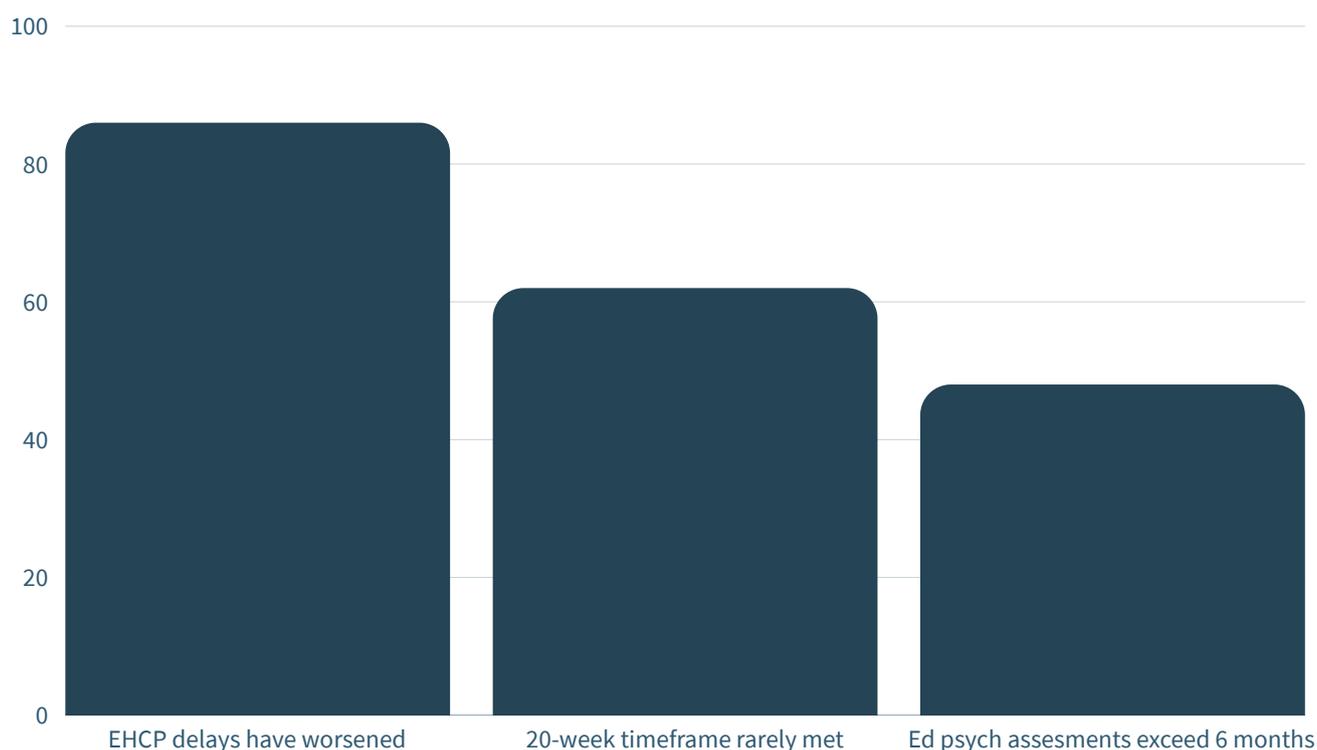
The 2025 Catholic Schools SEND Survey was commissioned by the CES and distributed to all Catholic maintained schools and academies across England between March and May 2025.

The purpose of the survey was to capture the lived experience of Catholic schools delivering education to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and to assess the operational, financial, and pastoral realities of current provision.

Responses were received from 427 schools, representing a broad geographical and demographic cross-section of the sector. Approximately 68 per cent of respondents were primary schools, 27 per cent secondary, and 5 per cent all-through or other settings. The sample includes both voluntary aided (VA) and multi-academy trust (MAT) schools, covering rural and urban areas in all English dioceses.

The findings confirm that Catholic schools are working hard to meet growing levels of need within a system that is increasingly overstretched. We present key results, structured under five themes: identification and assessment, staffing and expertise, parental partnership, funding and resources, and wider system impacts.

## Reported Delays in SEND Assessment Process



# Finding 1: Identification and Assessment



**Catholic schools reported a clear pattern of increasing demand and reduced timeliness of external assessment.**

Many respondents expressed frustration that bureaucratic requirements had overtaken direct support for children. One headteacher wrote:

*“We are spending more time completing evidence for EHCP applications than we are delivering the interventions those plans are supposed to fund.”*

Schools described growing inconsistency in thresholds and expectations between local authorities. In some dioceses, neighbouring councils apply markedly different criteria for approving EHCPs, creating inequity in provision even within a single Catholic academy trust.

The data also show that Catholic schools are frequently the first to identify unmet needs. 73 per cent of respondents said that initial concerns about a child’s development were raised by school staff rather than parents or health professionals. However, the same schools reported limited access to early intervention specialists. Only 45 per cent could routinely access speech and language therapy or occupational therapy within their locality.

**The cumulative effect is a pattern of late intervention and prolonged uncertainty for families. As one survey respondent observed:**

*“Children’s needs don’t disappear while we wait for the paperwork. We end up supporting them informally, but without the recognition or resources to do it properly.”*

**86%**

of schools said delays in securing EHCP assessments have worsened.

**62%**

reported that local authority decisions did not meet the statutory 20-week completion timeframe.

**48%**

said that EPAs now take over six months on average to arrange.

# Finding 2: Staffing, Expertise, and Professional Formation



**Catholic schools identify the shortage of specialist staff as the single most pressing operational challenge in SEND provision.**

72 per cent of respondents said they found it difficult or very difficult to recruit qualified SENDCos, and over half of respondents reported that classroom assistants were delivering most of the one-to-one support for pupils with additional needs. Only 38% of respondents have been able to offer staff any formal SEND-specific professional development in the previous 12 months.

While schools expressed appreciation for the commitment and skill of their teaching assistants, many noted that reliance on paraprofessional staff without consistent training risks variability in quality and outcomes.

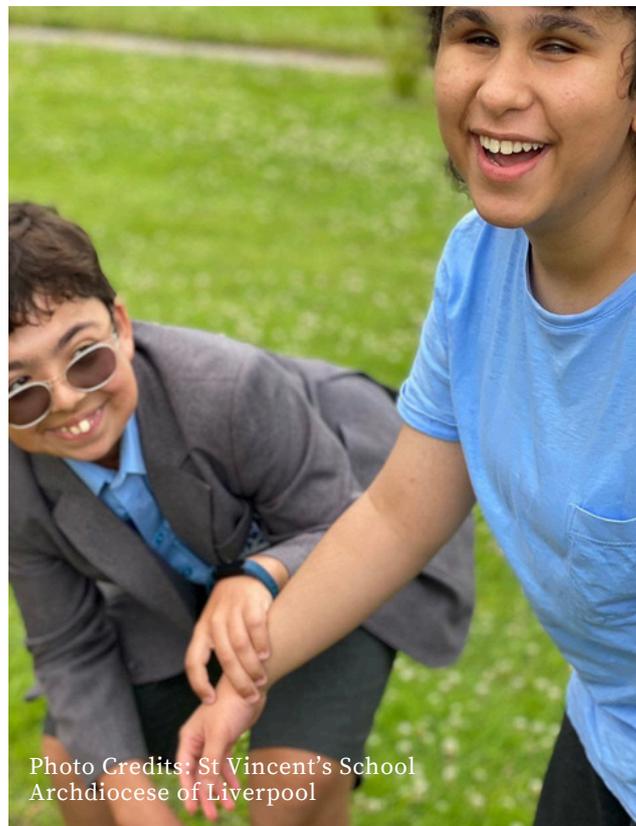


Photo Credits: St Vincent's School  
Archdiocese of Liverpool

Leaders also raised concerns about the sustainability of the SENDCo role itself. In small Catholic primaries, it is common for one teacher to serve simultaneously as SENDCo, Designated Safeguarding Lead, and Deputy Head. This workload is incompatible with the complexity of current statutory responsibilities.

Several respondents proposed regional collaboration models to share expertise and reduce isolation. However, such collaboration requires additional funding for time release and travel.

Formation, in the Catholic sense, goes beyond technical training. It involves cultivating professional resilience, empathy, and ethical commitment. Respondents repeatedly linked their motivation to the Church's call to serve "the whole person."

As one survey respondent explained:

*"I think there needs to be a HUGE overhaul of the whole system to include a massive training and resourcing programme in our schools. Mainstream isn't what it was 20 years ago and we need to think about it differently rather than fire fighting. We need to develop the skill, will and capacity of ALL schools to meet the changing needs of our communities."*

# Finding 3: Parental Partnership and Trust



**Parents remain central partners in Catholic education, but the survey shows a growing trust gap between families and statutory services.**

59 per cent of Catholic schools said that parental confidence in local authorities had fallen significantly since 2023. On a strong positive note, 82 per cent of schools reported strong or very strong relationships with parents at school level, and 67 per cent said that parents often turn to them for help in navigating the bureaucracy of SEND applications and appeals.

The written responses describe schools frequently acting as intermediaries between families and local government. As one teacher explained;

*“We need a better approach to joined-up integrated working, between health, education and social worker, where schools do not become the social workers and parents are often held to account more readily, in a timely fashion, during the first 1,001 days of childhood. It would better for schools to have designated named 'cluster' social workers, who would sit in line with early help assessment teams to support better joined-up working.”*

Our schools and teachers also emphasised that parental engagement is not purely transactional. It is relational and spiritual. In the words of one respondent.

However, this trust comes with responsibility. Schools increasingly absorb the emotional burden created by systemic failure. Several respondents warned of burnout among pastoral staff who, without counselling or professional supervision, manage situations of profound family distress.

*“We don't have the resources/space to meet need of children with SEND in our school. Those who are able to access teaching and learning alongside their peers need more support from staff, which we don't have due to funding. Children who are not SEND are now disadvantaged because they don't receive the support needed because all time/resources are spent on SEND children.”*

# Finding 4: Funding and Resource Constraints



## The financial pressures on SEND provision are acute and consistent across dioceses.

- **91 per cent** of Catholic schools said SEND provision placed “significant or unsustainable pressure” on their budgets.
- **43 per cent** had reallocated funding from enrichment or extracurricular activities to sustain core one-to-one support.
- **27 per cent** had drawn on parish or charitable donations to purchase assistive technology or specialist equipment.

Many schools said they could no longer rely on local authority “top-up” funding to cover the full cost of provision, forcing them to absorb shortfalls from their general budgets. In some cases, this amounted to tens of thousands of pounds per year.

Headteachers also reported the moral difficulty of resource allocation decisions, explaining;

*“Funding does not keep up with increased staffing costs (e.g. pay rises, pension contributions, etc). Accessing funding takes too long.*

*By the time an EHCP has been granted and the funding agreed, the school has realistically spent ~ £10k because £6k has to be spent at the time of application and funding is not backdated to the panel date.*

*There is a 2-3 month lag from the panel agreeing the EHCP can be granted and the funding starting but the school is still financing the support during this time.”*

Respondents expressed particular concern that financial pressures are undermining early intervention. Without timely support in primary education, needs escalate and become more expensive to manage later. Schools therefore argue that early funding is not only morally right but fiscally prudent.

The cumulative pressures outlined above are reshaping the culture of SEND provision in schools. Leaders described a growing sense of isolation and administrative fatigue. Many feel that accountability frameworks, while well-intentioned, have created a compliance culture rather than one of collaboration and trust.



Nevertheless, Catholic schools retain a distinctive resilience. Several respondents attributed this to the sector’s moral and spiritual foundations.

This sense of vocation is a notable asset within the national system and should be recognised as such in future policy design. It demonstrates that, while resources are essential, reform must also consider values, culture, and the formation of professionals who can sustain inclusion over the long term.

# Setting up a SEND Unit: A Case Study



## *As told by Jerry Giles, Principal of St Joseph's Catholic College*

Just over seven years ago Swindon Borough Council realised their SEND provision had far more applications than places. All 12 secondary schools in Swindon were approached to see if they would bid to take in children with EHCPs who would ordinarily go to one of the specialist SEND schools, but which didn't have enough places.

We thought we should do this, as a fully comprehensive Catholic school, and took the first intake of 12, converting a classroom for them. Then the local authority asked about us writing another bid to take in a second group for the year after. Instead of a year-by-year bid approach our proposal was to set up a permanent SEND unit with guaranteed revenue. They agreed and provided the capital investment for us to convert some existing classrooms within the school building.

The unit has five classrooms and a central resource area plus some offices, and is named the Aquinas Centre after St Thomas Aquinas, patron saint of Catholic schools and universities. It's absolutely an integral part of our school, which for context is a secondary with 1,400 students. There are 60 places and 12 in each year group, which have their own teachers, and there are 14 teaching assistants.

For more specialist support we work with an educational psychologist, a nurse, a speech and language therapist and others as necessary.

The timetabling is different but the main school curriculum is used to indicate topics covered. If the Aquinas students in Year 8 are doing geography, for instance, the school's Year 8 geography curriculum will be differentiated and replanned to match their needs. They've always done PE with the rest of the school, as well as going to assemblies, Mass and whole school events.

On average, we receive between 40 and 50 EHCPs from which the local authority proposes 12 for our intake. We're now considering an expansion to the unit to provide some dedicated outdoor space funded through the school's capital programme of works.

Funding for EHCPs doesn't cover the cost of the mandated support, of course, with schools expected to find the rest from within budgets. With numbers of EHCPs and costs rising the system is being reviewed by the government.

A more sustainable solution might be if a local state provider in Swindon takes on those students with the highest level of need on a not-for-profit basis. This would enable a greater equity of distribution for the SEND funding for the area.



Photo Credit: Swindon Borough Council

# Our Five Recommendations



*Catholic schools are experiencing unprecedented demand for SEND provision amid worsening resource constraints, and recruitment and retention of specialist staff are crucial. However, despite low parental trust in the statutory system, confidence in Catholic schools remains high.*

*Our recommendations are based on what is working on the ground in a diverse set of schools across England. We work with schools, families, communities and charities to ensure that children are receiving the best education possible, regardless of their EHCP status.*

## **1. Catholic schools should be seen as strategic partners in SEND reform.**

With over 2,000 institutions across England, the Catholic sector offers extensive reach into local communities. Its schools already operate at the intersection of education, social care, and pastoral support. Government should involve Catholic representatives directly in future consultations, pilot programmes, and advisory panels relating to SEND.

## **2. Strengthen early intervention through targeted funding.**

Survey data demonstrate that delayed assessment is the root cause of many downstream costs. Investment in early-stage diagnostic and intervention services, particularly within primary schools, is both educationally effective and fiscally prudent.

## **3. Prioritise professional formation alongside training.**

Technical competence must be matched by moral and emotional resilience. Future frameworks for teacher and SENDCo development should draw upon an understanding of *formation*—equipping educators to accompany children and families with compassion and integrity.

## **4. Protect and enhance confidence.**

The survey highlights the erosion of trust in statutory processes. Any revision of EHCPs must preserve enforceable rights and strengthen communication channels between families, schools, local authorities and truly recognise parents as the primary educators.

## **5. Facilitate collaboration between mainstream and special schools.**

Catholic special schools can be useful examples, offering outreach, mentoring, and shared professional development to neighbouring mainstream schools. This model reflects the Church’s concept of the “common good” and supports more coherent local provision.

*“Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

— Proverbs 31:8-9

# Conclusions



*The evidence presented across this report reveals a system under strain but not without hope. Catholic schools, animated by faith and service, demonstrate that inclusion is possible even in adversity. Staff and teachers in our Catholic schools are, by and large going the extra mile to serve parents and students in their education needs. They remind policymakers that education is not merely a mechanism for knowledge transfer, but a moral enterprise grounded in the recognition of human dignity.*

Reform of the national SEND framework must therefore begin with a renewed vision, one that values every child as a person rather than a problem, and that sees in every school a community capable of compassion as well as competence.

As *Called to Flourish in Faith and Hope* concludes, “Participation in the mission of the Church in education is a call to flourishing ... a fullness of life, nurtured into being fully alive in mind, body and spirit.” That call is as urgent now as it has ever been.

## Local Innovation and the Role of Catholic Schools

A model of community-based inclusion aligns closely with Catholic social teaching. It demonstrates that investment in local provision, co-designed with families, can yield significant social returns. Catholic schools are often natural conveners for such partnerships: they possess community trust, long-term institutional presence, and a pastoral ethos that complements public-sector objectives.

In dioceses such as Clifton, Liverpool, and Southwark, Catholic schools have pioneered small-scale inclusion hubs, dedicated spaces within mainstream schools that offer tailored support while maintaining access to wider peer groups. These initiatives illustrate how Catholic education embodies the principle of Communion set out in *Called to Flourish in Faith and Hope*: education as relationship, not isolation.

The Catholic Education Service is always ready to work in partnership with government, local authorities, and the wider education sector to ensure that all children are given the opportunity to live, learn, and flourish in faith and hope.

# Conclusions: Implications on Policy



## **The evidence from across English Catholic schools points to several underlying patterns:**

The system is operating beyond capacity. Demand for SEND support continues to grow faster than available resource. The current structure of EHCP entitlements and local authority funding is unsustainable without reform of commissioning and accountability mechanisms.

Reforms must protect parental confidence. The trust deficit cannot be repaired through procedural change alone. Families must see that reforms strengthen, not weaken, their rights to support.

Local partnerships deliver value. Evidence from Catholic schools and local authority collaborations shows that small-scale, community-led innovation improves outcomes and reduces costs.

Professional formation is as critical as funding. Investment in people (teachers, assistants, specialists) is central to any sustainable solution. Catholic education's tradition of holistic formation offers a model for this approach.



