

# **Criteria and guidance for making provision for children with severe learning difficulties**

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## Introduction

There is no one accepted definition of severe learning difficulties (SLD) Children with complex developmental and sensory needs, medical and physical difficulties may be identified at birth. The early identification of children with the most severe and complex difficulties will be initially through collaboration between the health services, paediatricians, health visitors and the family's general practitioner. Young children with severe and complex learning and development difficulties will usually be identified during their early years.

Children and young people who have severe learning difficulties include children who have profound and multiple learning difficulties. All will have severe problems with learning throughout their school career, resulting in attainment which is significantly below age related expectations and will require a high level of support

Children and young people with severe learning difficulties have a global developmental delay and may have related difficulties with fine and gross motor skills, language and communication or social interactions. Some will also have sensory impairment, for example, a hearing and/or visual impairment and/or a physical disability. Some will have autistic behaviours. A minority of children and young people may have isolated areas of ability, for example in social interaction, while being severely delayed in other areas of intellectual development. Some children and young people will have severe medical conditions (eg severe epilepsy) which require continual monitoring and intervention throughout their lives. Children and young people may present behavioural challenges as a result of, or related to, their learning difficulties.

The majority of young people with severe learning difficulties are unlikely to be able to be totally independent in all aspects of life and learning but require the maximum possible independence within an inclusive society.

## Criteria for children with severe learning difficulties

A child will be considered to have severe learning difficulties if he or she fulfils the following criteria:

- his or her general functioning is at a developmental level which is significantly less than half of his or her chronological age (*this criterion is generally more applicable to younger aged children*)
- he or she is, or is likely to be, significantly below age related expectations in all areas of the National Curriculum and may not be able to attain beyond P-levels and is likely to have difficulty in the generalisation of learned skills.
- he or she continues to have many of the following needs beyond the Early Years Foundation Stage:

### **Significant delay in acquiring communication skills, eg:**

- little or no functional spoken language
- little or no understanding of spoken language
- a need to sign and/or use a symbol system to aid communication

communication skills that are only effective and functionally useful in a context where other individuals know the child well

- his or her own idiosyncratic means of communicating.

**Significant delay in acquiring personal independence skills, eg:**

- is unable to dress/undress him or herself or able to do so only with considerable assistance or prompts
- needs adult assistance or prompts to eat and drink independently
- has limited or no toilet skills, and sometimes not aware of that need
- is totally dependent upon an adult for all personal care.

**Significant delay in other life skills, eg:**

- is unable to appreciate or respond appropriately to common potentially dangerous situations and has little idea of reducing dangers in his or her environment
- has very immature social skills for their chronological age.

## **Special School Audit**

Children and young people up to the age of 19 years attending special schools in Hampshire are assessed for funding purposes by means of the Special School Audit. Regardless of the type of special school attended, children with severe learning difficulties will be funded at Step 5, or for children with high dependency Step 6 or Step 7 of the Special School Audit.

For more details please refer to Special School Audit guidance at <http://intranet.hants.gov.uk/childrens-services/cs-schools/sen.htm>

## **Children who are highly dependent**

Children with severe learning difficulties who are assessed as having a high dependency (HD) are as follows:

### **Children and young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties**

Children and young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) have the most severe learning difficulties, a high level of adult dependency and will continue to function at the earliest levels of development throughout their school career and into adulthood. They have a very severe global developmental delay (*or acquired impairment from, for example, an accident*) with associated physical, sensory and health related needs. Some will have severe communication and language difficulties and severe physical difficulties. They generally have a developmental level which is less than one third of their chronological age, and can be functioning at the level of a very young infant. They are likely to operate within the lower P-levels throughout their educational years, and are entirely dependent on an adult for all personal needs. Their communication can be restricted to non-verbal gesturing, body language and physical contact.

## **Children and young people with severe challenging behaviour**

Children and young people with severe learning difficulties and severe challenging behaviour (SCB) exhibit behaviours which are either dangerous to themselves or others or interfere with their education to an extent that they require intensive adult support and strategies specifically designed to improve and control their behaviour and help them develop their skills to access the community appropriately. These interventions necessitate very high levels of staff support.

## **Children and young people with severe autism**

A number of children and young people with severe learning difficulties and complex autism will be highly dependent because of their associated severe challenging behaviour. For others their severe learning difficulties are compounded by autism which manifests itself in extreme passivity and extreme difficulties with communication. These children and young people may exhibit high levels of ritualistic or stereotypical behaviour and are severely impaired in all aspects of the triad of impairments. They need a very highly structured teaching environment and explicit teaching of communication and interactional skills, which requires a high level of adult support.

## **Specialist provision for children with severe learning difficulties**

Children with severe learning difficulties will usually be self evident and identified before statutory school age through close collaboration between Children's Services, Health and Social Care services. Early years children and their families will often be offered support by the local Portage Home Visiting service. Children can be offered the opportunity to attend a maintained nursery class, either special or mainstream, though an increasing number of children are offered financial support to attend a local non-maintained early years setting. In any of these settings, their special educational needs and development will be monitored and if required a statutory EHC assessment will be made.

The County Council has criteria, based on the SEN and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years, which are used to help to decide whether or not to carry out an EHC assessment of a child's/young person's special educational needs and if so whether, after carrying out an EHC assessment to issue an EHC plan. Children with severe learning difficulties will meet the County Council's criteria for statutory assessment for moderate learning difficulties available online at [www.hants.gov.uk/sencriteria](http://www.hants.gov.uk/sencriteria).

### **All children with severe learning difficulties will need:**

- intensive educational support for significant amounts of the day
- highly structured teaching programmes
- access to the National Curriculum at appropriate levels with significant modification and differentiation and an emphasis on meeting the individual needs of the particular child
- a safe environment which fosters their independence
- ongoing involvement from a range of professionals and agencies, working in a way which reflects good multi-agency practice

- support for any specific areas of ability which the individual child demonstrates
- support to develop social, communication, self help and other life skills
- opportunities to learn alongside peers and in the wider community, where appropriate
- support to develop self advocacy and the ability to exercise choice.

**Some children with severe learning difficulties will need:**

- specialist equipment, for example adapted seating, support frames, hoists, etc.
- access to a hydrotherapy pool
- multisensory facilities
- augmentative and/or alternative communication systems
- close supervision to reduce the risks of harm
- intensive individual behaviour programmes
- support for sensory impairment, physical disability or a communication disorder
- intensive daily therapeutic support
- medical monitoring and intervention.

**School placement**

The County Council is committed to the principles outlined in the *SEN and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0-25 years* and the guidance *Inclusive Schooling: children with Special Educational Needs (DfE)*. Decisions over school placement are taken by the SEN Service having regard to parental preference. Children may:

- be included in a local mainstream school
- in the New Forest area, attend a mainstream school with specially resourced provision for children with severe learning difficulties
- attend a special school.

When considering each child's placement, there are a number of factors which need to be considered carefully by parents and the SEN Service.

**Local mainstream school**

An advantage of a local mainstream school is that the child will be included in his or her local community. This will provide beneficial social opportunities for both the child, their family and other children and families from the locality. However, to be successful, it is important that a mainstream placement is believed to be in the child's best interest.

Where a child with severe learning difficulties is included in a local mainstream school, the level of additional resources is identified in the EHC plan and can be a combination of additional teaching time and /or learning support assistance time. School staff will also need support and advice to assist them in delivering an appropriately differentiated

and challenging curriculum. This is available from Educational Psychologists, SEN Advisory Teachers and outreach staff from special schools.

Sometimes the qualified teaching support time may be provided by an outreach teacher from a special school, where this is available locally. In this case the specialist teacher undertakes to work with the class teacher to plan and develop an appropriate education programme. He or she provides on-going advice to the mainstream school staff on appropriate teaching strategies, behaviour management and systematic monitoring of progress.

In deciding whether a mainstream placement is appropriate, the following list of indicators should be considered by parents and the SEN Service. The indicators are not listed in hierarchical order nor is it suggested that any child should necessarily meet all of the indicators for a mainstream school to be successful. It should also be recognised that the child may need an initial transition period in order to determine whether he or she is able to access the mainstream curriculum and be fully included.

**Some indicators of likely success in mainstream:**

- a the child can communicate his or her needs without experiencing exceptional levels of frustration
- b the child can understand what is communicated to him or her and respond appropriately
- c the child is becoming an increasingly independent learner
- d the child can access the national curriculum differentiated where necessary so that he or she can learn meaningfully and positively
- e the child is able to spend the majority of the time receiving and sharing an appropriate education in a mainstream class and to work in a class with other children of the same chronological age or within one year group of it
- f any behavioural problems can be managed without disrupting the efficient education of other children
- g supporting agencies will have an appropriate level of contact with the child and his or her family.

It is also important to consider whether the physical environment in a particular school is accessible or what reasonable measures can be taken to make it accessible.

See also Appendices 1 and 2.

**Specialist provision**

All maintained specialist provision, whether specialist resourced provision in mainstream schools or special schools, offers a flexible approach to curriculum delivery with an emphasis on meeting individual needs and preparing pupils for life through the teaching of social and life skills. There are small class groups with a high teacher to pupil ratio and intensive learning support assistance time allocated to classes according to need. There is more regular support from professionals from other agencies, particularly health.

## **Mainstream schools with specialist resourced provision for children with severe learning difficulties**

Two mainstream primary schools in the county offer specialist provision of this type. They are Ashley Infant School and Tiptoe Primary School, both situated in the New Forest. Resourced mainstream provision combines the advantages of social and academic inclusion with some of the benefits available in a special school. The children can be taught in their mainstream classes with support also taught in the resourced provision base within the school by specialist staff. Children are included into their year group curriculum subjects and social activities where appropriate. The schools have close liaison with the local health services and receive support and advice on therapy programmes for individual children, where required.

**Ashley Infant School** provides for up to 16 full time equivalent places for children aged three to seven years of age. There are two classes, an Early Years class for eight full time equivalent children and a Key Stage 1 class for eight children.

**Tiptoe Primary School** provides for eight children in one class covering Key Stage 2.

As places are limited, priority for placement is given to children who are most able to benefit from learning in an inclusive environment.

Many of the indicators of likely success in a mainstream environment listed on the previous page remain appropriate for specially resourced mainstream provision. In addition it may be helpful to consider whether the child:

- can learn in a small group
- can participate for some of the time in mainstream school activities alongside other children.

The schools are able to cater for a small number of children with physical and sensory disabilities and those within the autistic spectrum. However, given the small size of each provision, admission is subject to consideration of how easily the child is able to have his or her needs met in the context of the whole group and the needs of the group as a whole. Children who are assessed as being at Step 6 of the Hampshire Special School Audit will not normally be offered resource provision places.

Children do not transfer automatically from the Ashley to the Tiptoe provision and decisions over placement are subject to advice from the professionals involved and discussion with parents at each child's annual review.

## **Special schools**

In Hampshire, children with severe learning difficulties may attend special schools for children with:

- severe learning difficulties
- significant and complex learning difficulties
- moderate learning difficulties.

Advantages of a special school placement include a high number of experienced staff and a range of specialist expertise, facilities and equipment on site. The curriculum includes greater differentiation and opportunity to incorporate the development of life

and independence skills. There is also regular and relatively frequent access to support from staff from other agencies.

**Some factors which suggest a special school placement may be most appropriate are:**

- the child does not meet a significant number of the indicators listed above
- the need for a secure/safe environment
- the need for frequent and regular access to staff from other agencies, eg health
- the need for highly specialised equipment, eg hoists
- the need for access to a hydrotherapy pool
- the need for multisensory facilities on site
- the need for continuing augmentative communication techniques.

Children who are highly dependent are not normally offered a place in a school for children with moderate learning difficulties.

Children are only normally offered transport to the nearest appropriate special school.

**Further information**

List of specialist provision in Hampshire for children and young people with severe learning difficulties

- Please refer to the document *Provision in Hampshire for children and young people with EHC plans* available online at <http://documents.hants.gov.uk/childrens-services/sen-provision-in-hampshire.pdf>

or go to the Local Offer at <https://fish.hants.gov.uk/localoffer>

Hampshire County Council SEN Criteria documents are available online at [www.hants.gov.uk/sencriteria](http://www.hants.gov.uk/sencriteria)

SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years, DfE, 2015 available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25)

Schools: guide to the 0 to 25 years SEND Code of Practice, DfE, available at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-schools-and-alternative-provision-settings)

If you would like more information please contact the SEN Service, email [enquiries.sen@hants.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries.sen@hants.gov.uk)

## **Appendix 1 - Some school factors which are likely to contribute to the success of a mainstream placement**

In mainstream schools where children with severe learning difficulties are being successfully included, a combination of factors contribute to the successful inclusion. They are schools which make effective inclusive provision in line with the three key principles for *inclusion emphasised in the National Curriculum Inclusion Statement, namely:*

- setting suitable learning challenges
- responding to pupils' diverse needs
- overcoming potential barriers to learning and assessment for individuals and groups of pupils.

They are schools which have effective internal communication systems, are willing to review their practice regularly and to learn from others and have a general approach which gives positive regard to all children no matter what their ability.

Factors which have been found to contribute to success can be grouped in four broad areas:

### **Effective systems and structures**

- easily identifiable classrooms/teaching bases
- clearly defined physical boundaries both inside and outside the school building
- the ability to work flexibly in planning the curriculum in line with the *QCDA guidelines revised*
- clearly identifiable daily routines and defined timetables
- an effective and flexible service from the full range of health authority therapists
- a setting which promotes good opportunities for social inclusion with children of the same age
- a strong emphasis on the skills of communication, both of the staff and children
- an environment where all children's communicative attempts are acknowledged and fostered
- opportunities for continued social contact with children of the same age in after school groups.

### **High quality support for children**

- acknowledgement that the classteacher is the primary educator of the child within a whole school approach to special educational needs
- a skilled and trained team of learning support assistants, providing a level of contact appropriate to the individual child
- good team work between classteacher, learning support assistants, SEN Co-ordinator and external agencies

- commitment to further training and development of staff
- staff skilled to provide appropriate strategies and resources with particular reference to individual learning styles to assist children's access to the curriculum and school routines
- an understanding of, and skills in developing, multisensory approaches to learning
- an understanding of individualised instruction and precision teaching techniques
- an effective use of individual education plans and other SEN Code of Practice guidance
- an effective system of home school liaison, incorporating home school books or other systems, and an expectation that parents will work in partnership with the school
- high expectations of children with special educational needs in the area of self help and independence skills. A philosophy of allowing children with special educational needs to take planned risks and to 'have a go' at tasks
- a wide range of reinforcements and rewards for small steps in attainment, both academic and social
- promoting independence in learning
- a range of ICT (eg concept keyboards, switches, touch screens) and appropriate software.

### **Flexibility of approach**

- flexibility in the use of year groups to allow continued contact with peers and slower progress through the key stages
- systems to release staff for liaison allowing overlap of classteacher, learning support assistant and support teacher hours to ensure effective contact and communication
- staff skilled in preparing children for changes in 'schedules' or routines
- flexibility in the use of classroom and other accommodation (when physical access is a consideration).

### **Behavioural approaches**

- high expectations of the appropriate behaviour of all children, and clear codes of conduct, understood by all
- an understanding of the way behaviour is used as a communicative function
- skills in implementing individual behaviour plans
- a strong emphasis on children understanding the consequences of their behaviour and its impact on others
- support from educational psychologists to plan effective programmes addressing behavioural and other targets.

## **Appendix 2 - Additional child indicators of the likely success of a local mainstream placement**

The following indicators are an additional guide to those listed on page 5 and 6 and may be helpful to those who are discussing the future placement of a child with severe learning difficulties.

### **For placement at Key Stage 1**

At this stage children are likely to be successful in a mainstream placement with the recommended level of support if they can be enabled to:

#### **Social expectations**

- separate from parents within an appropriate period of time
- tolerate the proximity of other children or adults for large parts of the school day
- fetch a familiar object on request from within the classroom. Supplementary cues (objects of reference, symbols, signs or gestures) may be necessary to support the request
- play in parallel with other children
- show indications of responding to toilet training
- eat independently
- have a basic awareness of the dangers in the environment
- have an awareness of the need to stay within established physical boundaries (eg the classroom or playground, school grounds ).

#### **Academic expectations**

- sustain their attention to an adult directed task, with one to one adult supervision, for approximately five minutes
- consistently spend at least five minutes on an activity they have chosen for themselves without adult support
- respond to instructions given to the group or remain within physical boundaries, though it may be necessary to provide several prompts in order to secure this
- cope with the distractions of a mainstream classroom.

### **Transition to Key Stage 2**

At this stage children are likely to be successful in a mainstream placement with the recommended level of support if they can be enabled to:

#### **Social expectations**

- conform to school routines/expected standards of behaviour

- demonstrate independence using the toilet and washing hands
- eat using appropriate utensils at a reasonable speed
- undress themselves and progress towards independence in dressing
- move around the known part of the building independently and undertake a simple errand outside the classroom independently or with minimal support
- respond to a simple instruction from a known adult
- effectively communicate basic needs (by word, sign, symbols etc.)
- take turns with other children with minimal support
- have an awareness of the dangers in the environment.

### **Academic expectations**

- give their name and address and record their first name legibly
- spend 10 minutes working consistently on a motivating and appropriate task without adult support
- contribute to group activities/discussions appropriately, albeit at a differentiated level
- choose between two activities and persevere with the chosen activity
- follow a visual/written timetable with minimal support
- respond to differentiated activities without insisting that they 'do the same as everyone else'.

### **Transition to Key Stage 3**

At this stage children are likely to be successful in a mainstream placement with the recommended level of support if they can be enabled to:

### **Social expectations**

- have appropriate organisational skills to enable them to function in the school environment with minimal support, eg finding classroom/equipment and arriving on time
- understand basic class rules within a variety of settings
- respond appropriately to a change in routine, ie seek help when confused
- show a level of independence from both other children and from adult support
- have social behaviours which do not separate them unduly from other pupils
- show appropriate social interaction with other pupils including those of the opposite gender

- have an understanding of appropriate behaviour in a variety of different environments
- take part in social activities, eg waiting, turn taking, understanding simple rules, games
- show care for property
- demonstrate self advocacy
- take care of their personal hygiene with appropriate guidance
- anticipate possible dangers in the environment
- recognise their own feelings and those of others and respond appropriately
- benefit from being a member of the wider school community, eg participate in after school activities.

### **Academic expectations**

- identify different curriculum subjects
- spend the majority of the lesson engaged in appropriate tasks with support
- record information relating to a variety of subjects
- have a reasonable social sight vocabulary
- access the curriculum at the relevant Key Stage.