Schools North East

Case Studies

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Contents

About these Case Studies

Schools North East has gathered case studies from school leaders across our network to illustrate how current education policies and financial pressures are being felt at the chalk face in North East schools.

Through in-depth conversations with Head Teachers and senior leaders, including primary, secondary, special, and alternative provision, these case studies provide a detailed, authentic picture of the realities facing North East schools today.

They highlight the day-to-day challenges around funding, staffing, SEND provision, attendance, estate management, and wider community pressures, as well as examples of innovation, resilience, and good practice. Together, they demonstrate both the strain on the system and the extraordinary efforts of schools to continue delivering for their pupils and communities.

These case studies offer timely evidence of the pressures being faced in schools across the North East and beyond. They show that without sustained and adequate investment, schools risk losing vital capacity to deliver inclusive education, meet rising SEND, and maintain safe, well-supported environments for pupils and staff.

The case studies:

- Beyond the School Gate - When a System Failure Lands on Schools
- Navigating Growth Amid Financial Strain
- Inclusion at Scale - Sustaining Support in a High-Needs Secondary
- System Overload - When Specialist Provision Reaches Breaking Point

What the case studies reveal:

Key themes

Across very different contexts, four major themes emerge consistently:

1. Rising need and insufficient support for SEND

All leaders described sharp increases in the number and complexity of pupils with SEND. Some specialist settings have nearly doubled in size, while mainstream schools are retaining pupils assessed for specialist provision simply because no places exist. Long waits for EHCPs and diagnostic assessments leave children and families in crisis.

Schools report being routinely named in EHCPs even where they have explicitly said they cannot meet need.

2. Workforce strain, wellbeing concerns, and recruitment challenges

Staff are managing unprecedented levels of emotional and physical challenge. Teaching assistants in particular face low pay, high-risk work, and limited training pipelines. Injuries, absences, and burnout are rising, while leadership time is increasingly taken up with crisis management rather than strategic improvement.

Head Teachers in multiple settings are covering classes and duties due to staffing shortages.

3. Collapse of local support services around schools

Social care thresholds have risen sharply, early help cases are increasingly led by schools, and access to health, therapeutic, and diagnostic services is limited. Schools are picking up responsibilities once held by specialist agencies: supporting families in crisis, monitoring medical needs, and making decisions far outside the traditional remit of education professionals.

This retreat of services leaves vulnerable children at risk and places unsustainable pressure on schools.

4. Financial pressures threatening school sustainability

Across all case studies, leaders describe budgets at breaking point.

Challenges include:

- Rising staffing costs
- Frozen specialist place funding
- Safety valve constraints pushing down top-up funding
- Increased class sizes to make budgets viable
- Difficulty maintaining provision without cutting essential roles
- Capital pressures associated with ageing or PFI estates

Several schools state clearly that: "We cannot cut back any further."

A final call to Government:
Schools need support now

The publication of these case studies is intended as a final, evidence-driven appeal ahead of the Autumn Budget. Schools North East is urging the Chancellor to:

- Address the funding pressures faced by both mainstream and specialist settings
- Invest in SEND capacity, multi-agency services, and early intervention
- Provide stability for staffing and workforce planning
- Recognise the unique challenges facing schools in high-need regions
- Ensure no child's support is determined by local capacity failures

These testimonies demonstrate plainly that without additional support, schools will face further cuts that will be felt most acutely by the region's most vulnerable children.

Schools North East calls on MPs, policymakers, and the media to use these case studies as a lens into the current crisis, and to champion the urgent need for a more sustainable funding settlement for North East education.

Beyond the School Gate

When a System Failure Lands on Schools

School and context

This case study looks at a maintained community primary.

- 324 pupils on roll, previously over 450;
- 36% Free School Meals;
- 35% SEND, but only one pupil with an EHCP;
- Around 17% EAL; and
- 80% of pupils living in the three most deprived IDACI deciles.

The Head Teacher has led the school for over a decade, and has worked there for 30 years. The school serves an ex-mining community with areas of economic challenges, and multi-generational disadvantage.

> "I love the challenge of the area. It's an old mining community. I derive a lot of pleasure from seeing the success we can have with our children, because we work counter-culture in many ways."

Despite that commitment, the Head Teacher says this is "the most difficult period" they have faced in their career. Financial pressures, unmet SEND need, and the collapse of local services are combining to create what the Head Teacher calls "a perfect storm."

Key Takeaways

- Early years and SEND systems are under severe strain, leaving mainstream schools to manage profound needs without adequate support.
- The breakdown of multi-agency working - including health visitors, social care, and police - is placing additional safeguarding and welfare burdens on schools.
- Recruitment and retention challenges, coupled with pay progression rules, are driving financial instability.
- Falling rolls, rising needs, and partial funding for pay awards are forcing Head Teachers to take on classroom and cover duties.
- Despite these pressures, the school continues to deliver enrichment and stability for disadvantaged children and families.

1. Early Years and SEND - A system at Breaking Point

Key points:

- Rising complexity of needs among early years pupils.
- Limited Educational Psychologist access (three days per year).
- Lack of specialist places forcing schools to absorb pupils they cannot support.

The Head Teacher describes the situation in the school's nursery as "an early years SEND disaster." Children with significant and complex needs, including autism, Down syndrome, and chromosomal disorders, are being placed in mainstream settings without the required resources or specialist support.

> "I've got two pupils who need a high degree of intervention. They should be in a specialist setting. We've got one little boy who puts everything in his mouth - stones, leaves, anything. He has zero awareness that anyone else is there."

The school's three allocated Educational Psychologist days per year are insufficient. Even when supplemented by additional paid sessions, delays and missed appointments have left assessments incomplete.

> "They only assess one child a day. You can imagine in a school of this size, even though we've reduced in numbers, they're not really getting through a lot."

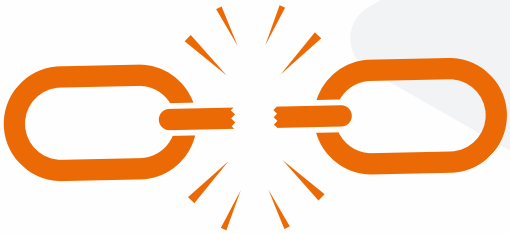
The local authority's efforts to reduce EHCP numbers have compounded the issue. The school currently has only one EHCP, despite high need.

> "The LA have been quite open about the fact they need to reduce the number of EHCPs. When you get one, it's statutory, but you're not really funded for it. The notional budget doesn't cover what you need it to cover."

Parents, meanwhile, are often given contradictory or limited advice. The Head Teacher describes situations where families are encouraged to place children in mainstream schools for assessment, even when a specialist setting would be more appropriate.

The moral tension this creates for school leaders is acute.

> We're inclusive, but there's a limit to how inclusive you can be. The hardest part of my job is always feeling that moral pressure, wanting children to be included, but knowing sometimes they're being let down."



2. The Collapse of Local Support Services

Key points:

- Loss of health visitor contact and breakdown of information sharing.
- Limited social care capacity and high staff turnover.
- Police and community liaison work no longer in place.

A central theme in the Head Teacher's account is the erosion of multi-agency working, which was previously the foundation of early identification and safeguarding.

> "We used to have a health visitor who met with me every year. We'd go through the children coming in so I'd know their background. Now, I don't know if a child's got a social worker unless the parent tells me. I've had children here on child protection plans and nobody has told me. Something happens and then that's when it becomes apparent."

The lack of communication is compounded by chronic capacity issues in local services. The Head Teacher describes social workers being "off or moved on" without notice, and cases falling through the cracks.

> "They struggle to recruit and retain. Last year they were 18 social workers down on their complement, which we feel the backlash of, because we're trying to chase things without that support."

The withdrawal of community policing has further weakened the safety net around families.

> "We used to have police officers who came into school, knew the children, even came on residentials. Now we've got nothing. I had a serious incident last week, and the only way I could get help was to phone 999 after the event. That leaves you feeling vulnerable."

These losses have shifted the burden of safeguarding and family support almost entirely onto schools.

> "These aren't school problems, they're societal problems that have landed on schools."

3. Financial and Staffing Pressures

Key points:

- Falling rolls and unfunded pay progression.
- Head Teacher and deputy covering classes and duties.
- Recruitment and retention of teaching assistants increasingly difficult.

Despite not currently being in deficit, the school is operating at the limits of financial sustainability. Falling rolls, partial funding of pay awards, and automatic progression to higher pay scales have combined to increase staffing costs significantly.

> "Next September, all the M6 teachers are going to automatically progress onto the upper pay scale unless you put them on a support plan. That's about £10,000 more on my budget this year than I was anticipating."

The consequences are visible in staffing capacity.

> "I've had to go too thin on staffing this year. I've let three teachers go. I've been teaching myself — covering Year 3, Year 4, and Year 6. I've covered lunchtime duties because we're short. It's not sustainable."

Recruiting support staff is an ongoing challenge.

> "Teaching assistants are actually quite a skilled job now. You need people who can do speech and language and phonics interventions, who can deal with behaviour. But it's hard to attract and keep them. It's tough work, and the pay is low."

Even when staff are retained, the strain on morale and workload is considerable.

> "Historically I could lead strategically. Now I'm firefighting. When you're not strategically leading your school, things don't improve."

4. Supporting Families and the Community

Key points:

- 80% of pupils in most deprived IDACI deciles.
- School acts as a hub for family welfare and crisis support.
- Attendance and safeguarding demands increasing resource and cost.

The school's role extends far beyond education, functioning as a vital community hub, supporting families with food, clothing, housing, and advice.

> "We give out food hampers and school uniform. We help parents access Citizens Advice and grants. I've spent evenings on the phone to housing services to stop families being evicted."

Around 40% of pupils are known to or monitored by social care, while others live in households with domestic violence, addiction, or mental health issues.

> "We're often the only consistent adult presence in children's lives. When parents are in crisis, we feel it."

The Head Teacher has introduced attendance incentives and a "door knocker" service to tackle persistent absence, but the costs are significant.

> "I pay £5,000 a year for a door knocker. I need it, because otherwise my parents wouldn't be brilliant at attendance, and the children need to be in school."

Despite the adversity, the Head Teacher insists that pupils remain shielded from much of the pressure.

> "Our children are really happy in school. We try to provide as much as we can — brilliant teachers, enrichment, music, theatre visits. But I worry how long we can sustain it."

5. Accountability and Policy Disconnect

Key points:

- Ofsted framework seen as punitive for schools with contextual challenges.
- Lack of understanding of inclusion and behaviour.
- Desire for accountability that recognises effort and context.

The Head Teacher is outspoken in their criticism of the proposed inspection framework, which they describe as "bullying" and disconnected from reality.

> "For a school like this, behaviour is excellent. But if attendance is 94%, that could stop us getting an outstanding judgement. How's that fair?"

The Head Teacher argues that inspectors fail to recognise the complexity of inclusion in communities with high levels of need.

> "Those children in nursery with profound needs, they're not with the others. Does that mean we fail the inclusion judgement? They don't even know what inclusion is."

Their frustration extends to the framework's expectations of parental engagement.

> "They talk about engagement in learning, but good luck. It's not like we don't try, but I can't be in their homes. Should my school be marked down because we try harder than most and still can't match that?"

The Head Teacher believes accountability should assess leadership within context, not just numerical outcomes.

> "It's about common sense. Judge whether the leader is doing as much as they can in the circumstances. That's what fairness looks like."

Conclusion

The school exemplifies the growing gap between the responsibilities schools are expected to shoulder and the support systems meant to surround them.

> "Fund SEND properly and get more special school places. These children aren't being included; they're being let down. If we had proper provision, it would take the pressure off staff, help other children, and improve outcomes."

The Head Teacher's message to policymakers is clear: schools are doing everything they can, but without properly funded external services, joined-up working, and realistic accountability, they are being left to carry a burden they cannot sustain alone.

Navigating Growth Amid Financial Strain

School and context

This case study looks at a rural primary school.

- 195 pupils on roll (expected to exceed 200 in spring)
- 15 two-year-olds enrolled in early years (limited to 5 per day for now)
- High levels of SEND: 21% identified, with 7 EHCPs – "unusually high for a school of this size"
- 17% Pupil Premium, low compared to inner-city schools

Although located in an affluent village, it borders a historically deprived town undergoing rapid change and housing growth. This shifting demographic means that, unlike many rural schools facing falling rolls, this school has a rising pupil population.

Despite important successes, such as increasing roll numbers, strong community engagement, and innovative use of early years provision, the current funding model is financially unsustainable.

Key Takeaways

- Per-pupil funding levels are insufficient, including for schools without high levels of disadvantage.
- The block grant needs to increase, independent of SEND or Pupil Premium allocations.
- Current financial survival is achieved through unsustainable goodwill, unpaid labour, and eroded provision.
- The pressure on schools to use EHCPs as budget tools risks compromising the integrity of SEND support.
- Staffing and support structures are at a breaking point, with no backup plans or emergency capacity.

1. Growing School with a Shrinking Budget

Despite growth in pupil numbers, the basic block grant is not keeping pace with costs. As the Head Teacher states:

> "To say we're stretched is just an understatement... It means that any changes to long-term sickness or a child with severe SEND becomes unmanageable... there is no wiggle room."

The Head Teacher highlights that "the basic block grant is not enough", with funding per pupil insufficient to keep pace with increasing day-to-day costs.

> "It's gotten so hard on a per-pupil basis, it means that you can only break even on a class size of 30. And that's just not sustainable, because unless you are in a busy inner city, you are not going to have class sizes of 30."

The school operates with no financial reserves and is recovering from a significant deficit accrued during its expansion from a first school to a primary. Though forecast to balance its budget next year, the school is expected to subsidise other trust schools thereafter.

Staffing has been cut to the bare minimum, leaving no flexibility to cover long-term sickness or support pupils with significant needs. The Head Teacher has half a day teaching commitment a week as well as lunch duties three times a week. The Deputy Head teaches 3.5 days with full lunch duties almost every day. For a school of this size, this level of teaching commitments from senior leadership is very high. "There is only one spare member of staff, and that's me", the Head says. With the high cost of using supply staff, the Head Teacher regularly has to plug gaps when there are staff absences.

2. SEND and EHCPs as Budget Levers

There is a deep concern about how EHCPs are being used, not as a tool for child-centered support, but as a financial necessity to keep staffing afloat.

> "EHCPs are a way where you can get a bit more money in order to sustain the operational costs of the school. And that's not healthy. That's not in the spirit of how SEND should be. But essentially, the children who have EHCPs allow us to keep the few TAs we have."

The school is reliant on EHCP funding to retain its limited number of TAs. There have been no TA redundancies, but only because vacancies from natural attrition have not been refilled. The school has lost five teaching assistants through attrition since 2023 and has not replaced them.

Other pressures include the inability to replace the caretaker, limited cleaning hours, and increasing workload for teachers covering office duties, clubs, and duties "on goodwill."

3. Staffing Cut to the Bone

- Only one full-time TA works Monday to Friday
- Caretaker post unfilled – the Head Teacher now picks up manual duties like brushing leaves and assembling furniture
- Staff are "dirt cheap" by the Head's own admission, yet the school is still in deficit

> "Our labour cost as a proportion of overall cost is 81%. 81% should be a really healthy percentage in order to operate. Why are we still in a deficit? Why are we still operating on a deficit? It's absolutely nuts, and makes no sense to me."

Staff morale is described as "low, particularly among long-serving TAs", who see colleagues leaving and not being replaced. Teachers are taking on lunchtime and after-school duties to maintain pupil enrichment, but the Head Teacher notes that "goodwill will not last forever".

4. Fragile Cost-saving Measures

- Free after-school clubs were cut in 2023
- Clubs have been moved to lunchtime due to staffing shortages
- Breakfast Club remains, only because of external funding and an extraordinarily efficient school cook
- School chef cooks from scratch, starting at 5 a.m., saving £12,000 a year on food costs
- Meals cost just 92p per child, far below the national average

The impact on pupils is subtle but significant: limited capacity for one-to-one or small-group interventions, fewer resources for SEND pupils, and a loss of extracurricular opportunities.

> "We used to offer free after-school clubs, but we had to stop in 2023. We moved extracurricular clubs to lunchtimes. I changed lunchtime from 45 minutes to an hour, so that I could ask teachers to do a lunchtime club a week. I'm now asking teachers to run an extracurricular club every week, plus lunch duties. For the size of our school, it doesn't make any sense that we don't have that capacity."

Despite the financial strain, the primary school continues to find creative ways to sustain quality. Early years provision has been expanded to generate income. The school's cook prepares all food from scratch, coming in earlier than allotted hours to do manual prep, keeping meal costs exceptionally low at just 92p per child, saving around £12,000 last year. "But what happens when she retires?" the Head Teacher asks. "Those savings won't last forever." Recruiting staff able to arrive early in rural areas is a significant challenge. The school uses the pupil premium to set up a breakfast club, and is now an early adopter of the DfE breakfast club scheme.

"We're a DfE early adopter, for the breakfast club. The only reason why that works is because they've chucked so much money in the setup costs. And we don't need the setup cost"

The school's reputation for quality education and strong community relationships has ensured a growing roll even amid regional declining rolls. The Head Teacher attributes this to "reputation and trust" but worries about the sustainability of this success under current funding pressures.

Conclusion

The primary school's frustrations are not about mismanagement. They stem from a funding formula that doesn't fit schools in rural, semi-affluent areas. These schools don't qualify for large Pupil Premium pots, yet their base costs are no less than inner-city schools. The current model creates a Catch-22:

"If I were in a deprived area, I'd have a whole other host of issues, but I'd at least have £400k-£500k in pupil premium. I've got £70k... It's an increase in the block grant that we need... a per-child increase that matches the costs we're incurring."

The Head Teacher is clear on what would make the biggest difference:

"It's not a new white paper or another SEND review, it's an increase in the per-pupil block grant. Schools like ours are being asked to do more with less every year, and there's simply no room left to cut. The system only works because of the people in it - the goodwill of staff, the unpaid hours, and the willingness to go above and beyond. That's not a sustainable model for education."

Inclusion at Scale

Sustaining Support in a High-Needs Secondary

School and context

This case study looks at a maintained secondary school.

- 1,402 pupils aged 11–16
- 33% disadvantaged
- 7% with EHCPs (around 100 pupils)
- 25% on the SEND register
- 4% EAL
- Highest number of young carers and pupils working with social workers in the town

The school serves one of the most disadvantaged communities in the North East. Despite this, the local authority has the lowest number of EHCPs in the region, a mismatch that the Head Teacher says reflects widespread under-identification of need, and places significant pressure on secondary schools to absorb unmet need.

> One of the biggest issues for us is the under-identification of young people's needs. Coming from small primaries to big secondaries is a real challenge. Their needs aren't being met, because we're not set up as primaries, and they find that a real struggle."

The school operates five in-house provisions designed to meet diverse needs, including autism, moderate learning difficulties, emotionally based school avoidance, and pupils at risk of exclusion. This network of support reflects the school's strong commitment to inclusion, but also its reliance on funding streams that are increasingly under pressure.

> "We've got five provisions: our RISE centre for moderate learning difficulties, our ARC centre for autism, our REACH provision for emotionally based school avoidance, SHINE for Key Stage 3 intervention, and CREATE for Key Stage 4 intervention — young people who would have been permanently excluded elsewhere."

Key Takeaways

- The school spends £2.2 million annually, around 20% of its total budget, on inclusion and SEND provision.
- Financial pressures threaten the sustainability of these provisions, risking increased exclusions and lost opportunities for young people.
- The school is seeing a growing gap between need and available specialist support, with six-year waiting lists for CAMHS diagnoses.
- Multi-agency services are stretched beyond capacity, with families facing rapid turnover of social workers and limited early intervention.
- Inclusive schools face an accountability system that does not recognise their context or the cost of doing the right thing.

1. Inclusion at the Heart of the School

- Five in-school inclusion provisions; 20% of total budget dedicated to inclusion.
- Preventing exclusion by retaining complex pupils in the local community.
- Rising costs and static high-needs funding threaten long-term viability.

The school's inclusion model enables pupils with complex needs to remain in a mainstream environment within their community. This includes pupils with autism, learning difficulties, and emotional or behavioural needs who, in other schools, might otherwise face exclusion or placement breakdown.

> "Inclusion itself costs me about £2.2 million a year out of a £10.8 million budget. That's so we can keep all these young people in a local secondary school in their town and actually feel part of the community."

However, the model's success depends on stability in both staffing and funding. The school can currently balance its books, but projections show that from the next financial year, continued inflationary pressures, pay awards, and national insurance costs will make the budget untenable.

> "We can balance it just this year, but we will not be able to balance it from now on. The first place I'll have to cut is the alternative provisions. The CREATE centre for Key Stage 4 will probably go from 30 placements to 20, which means 10 young people could be permanently excluded."

2. Financial Pressures and Staffing

Key points:

- Budget constraints are forcing non-replacement of staff.
- Reducing teacher contact time has improved wellbeing but may be reversed.
- Future cuts risk eroding staff morale and increasing absence.

The school's staffing model reflects a proactive approach to teacher retention. The school deliberately maintains reduced contact time to protect wellbeing and prevent burnout.

> "My staff welfare and wellbeing is very high — sickness is low, turnover is low. That's because my teachers are teaching on a lower timetable than they would normally in a mainstream setting."

However, sustaining this approach under financial constraint is becoming increasingly difficult.

> "I'd have to put them back up to 90% contact time. That would probably increase sickness, therefore increase costs, because you'd have supply. We haven't had a single supply teacher in the school since March 2020."

The Head Teacher warns that scaling back inclusion and pastoral support would also affect staff morale and the culture of the school. These are not easily rebuilt once lost.

> If I start cutting the alternative provisions and pastoral roles, it will have a knock-on effect on behaviour, staff wellbeing, and attendance."

3. Service Under Strain

Key points:

- External services unable to meet rising need.
- CAMHS waiting times up to six years.
- Rapid turnover among social workers, limited early intervention.
-

The availability of external support services in the local authority is severely constrained. While the school pays for additional Educational Psychologist input, this remains limited to one day per week, with further time purchased through a service-level agreement.

> "If the local authority was just meeting the needs of the EHCP students, I'm not sure what else we'd get. We pay extra to get the identification and the rest of it done."

Access to mental health services is particularly poor.

> I think it's 72 months now for a CAMHS diagnosis — six years. So you're talking about children being through secondary education into post-16 before they get anywhere near a diagnosis."

Social care and family support are also stretched, with high turnover and delayed intervention.

> "The number of social workers and family support workers that children are working with seems to change on a daily basis. That affects our young people because the support keeps changing."

This instability in external provision increases the load on schools, who step in to fill gaps that were never designed to be theirs to manage.

> "There's a general lack of services in the town unless you get to crisis point. Sometimes we can't get any provision until it's too late."

4. Adapting and Innovating

Key points:

- Upskilling staff in therapy and wellbeing interventions.
- Exploring new timetabling and staffing models to maintain inclusion.
- Community access and extracurricular opportunities under review.

In response to these pressures, the school is innovating within its constraints. Staff are being trained in art therapy, animal therapy, and Thrive approaches to build internal capacity as external services diminish.

> "We're training staff in animal therapy, art therapy, Thrive — all those things that other agencies used to do. But once we do that, it pulls them out of what they're already doing."

Even with this creativity, the limits of staffing and funding mean difficult trade-offs.

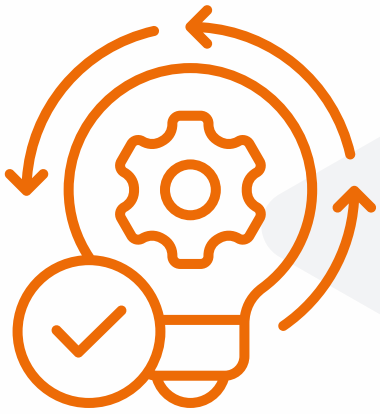
> "Though we might have a full-time qualified art therapist in the school, she may never do any art therapy if we can't release her from her art teaching."

The school is also exploring structural adaptations, including shorter timetables for some pupils and restructuring roles to stretch capacity further.

> "If two teachers leave, can we replace them with an HLTA? We're looking at whether we can shorten the school day for some young people, providing 20 hours instead of 32. We want to keep them engaged, but we haven't got the staff or the provision."

The ripple effect of financial pressure is also felt beyond the school gates. The school's facilities, including a swimming and hydrotherapy pool, are used by more than a dozen local youth clubs. Cuts to site staffing or maintenance could therefore reduce access to community recreation and enrichment opportunities.

> "If we close at weekends or cut community use, the town loses another safe space for young people. The ripple effects are huge."



5. Accountability and Policy Frustrations

Key points:

- Inspection frameworks fail to account for local context.
- Inclusive schools face penalties for serving higher-need populations.
- Accountability reform is essential to sustain inclusion.

The Head Teacher expresses deep concern that current accountability measures discourage inclusion.

> "As an inclusive school, we were penalised at our last inspection. The team didn't understand what an inclusive school was, or the demographic picture I've just given you, or the effect that has on progress measures."

The Head Teacher believes schools that take a higher proportion of SEND and disadvantaged pupils should be recognised, not punished.

> "If we're forced to join groups of schools, because we're inclusive, as soon as we join, those children will be kicked out. Inclusion should be rewarded financially and supported through accountability, not punished."

The Head Teacher links this to broader worries about the new Ofsted framework and how it intersects with curriculum reform and SEND reviews. They warn that multiple reforms arriving simultaneously could create a "perfect storm" for schools already stretched to capacity.

6. Looking Ahead

Key points:

- Funding must be targeted, not just increased.
- Accountability should measure community service as well as outcomes.
- Schools need autonomy to respond to local context.

The Head Teacher's message to policymakers is that inclusion requires intentional investment and systemic recognition.

> "We don't need money just chucking at us — we need it targeted and done in the right way, so it meets the needs of the children we've got. Our additional resource places still get £10,000 per child — the same as in 2010."

The Head Teacher calls for accountability systems that reflect community context and the realities of inclusive practice.

> "We need another reform of Ofsted — done with us, not to us — and a clear change in direction on accountability. Accountability should mean accountability for the community you serve."

Finally, they argue for stronger local autonomy in decision-making:

> "We've got to get schools to understand they're part of the community, not part of a bigger organisation. You can't make decisions miles away and claim to understand the children you serve."

Conclusion

The school provides an example of how schools can lead inclusion at scale, but also of the fragility of that success without systemic support. Sustaining this model requires adequate funding, effective external services, and an accountability system that rewards, rather than penalises, schools that serve their communities most fully.

> "Everything we do is about keeping our young people here — learning, included, and part of their community. But inclusion comes at a cost, and without support, that model won't hold."

System Overload

When Specialist Provision Reaches Breaking Point

School and context

This case study looks at a mixed multi-academy trust, with both mainstream primary and secondary schools as well as specialist settings.

- Two specialist settings examined:
  - An all-through 2–19 special school, which since opening grew from just over 200 pupils to 400, now full. In the first 16 years, there was an increase of 37%, with a further 25% increase over 2 years (2022 to 2024).
  - A primary SEMH provision, which since opening grew from 32 to 65, also full.

The Trust's specialist schools serve as the core of the local area's SEND system, and are now absorbing unprecedented levels of need. Bound by demographic pressures, lack of alternative placements, and structural limitations, the trust's specialist schools illustrate the vulnerabilities of a SEND system operating at maximum capacity. There is significant pressure on the Trust's specialist settings, which are increasingly being asked to support children whose needs they cannot safely or appropriately meet.

The CEO of the trust explains:

> "The increase in demand has accelerated greatly in the last four or five years. All the state-funded providers are full, and independent specialist providers are now refusing children... so it all rebounds onto us. Commissioners end up naming our schools in EHCPs even when our colleagues have made it very clear that we can't meet the needs of the child or young person."

The Executive Principal of the special schools in the trust adds:

> "We have about 10 children every year that we say we can't meet need for, but we get named anyway."

Key Takeaways

- Demand for specialist places has risen rapidly; local and regional capacity is exhausted
- Children are being placed in unsuitable provision due to lack of alternatives
- Class sizes have grown significantly alongside increasing complexity of need
- Multi-agency services (social care, health, therapies) are stretched or unavailable
- Safety valve arrangements are pushing down top-up levels despite rising costs
- Mainstream schools are retaining pupils assessed as needing specialist provision
- Workforce wellbeing, recruitment, and retention are under significant strain
- National delays to new special school projects are worsening local pressure

1. Rising Demand and Inappropriate Placements

Key points

- Rapid escalation in demand for specialist places
- Independent and out-of-area providers refusing high-need pupils
- Local authorities naming specialist and mainstream settings in EHCPs regardless of consultation responses
- Huge increase in parental demand for EHCPs and in parental preference for specialist settings that are already full
- More tribunal cases, which further exacerbate issues with lack of LA and school capacity and overstretched staff

Demand for specialist SEND provision in the area has grown far beyond what the system can sustain. Previously, local commissioners could access out-of-area placements or independent specialist providers (ISPs) when local capacity was full. That route has collapsed. ISPs are increasingly declining high-need pupils, meaning local commissioners now default to naming the Trust's specialist schools even when the Trust has formally advised that they cannot meet need.

This has created a pattern of inappropriate placement, where children who require highly individualised, specialist environments are placed in settings not designed for their profile. The consequences are profound: pupils struggle to access the curriculum, staff are forced to manage needs beyond their training and staffing ratios, and safety risks increase. This situation is driven not by professional disagreement about need, but by the lack of any alternative placement.

"We said no to about ten children last year because we couldn't meet need, but they have ended up coming to us as their named provision . There are around three who are really, really struggling, and whatever provision we put in, it's just not enough for them. It's a very large and busy environment, with multiple schools on one site, and it's overwhelming for some children. The impact of these pupils on site can, at times, impact on the efficient education of others."

One pupil's situation illustrates the scale of the mismatch: placed against consultation response, the pupil has still not been able to enter the building months after transfer. The pupil's education takes place entirely outdoors, contingent on weather conditions and staff availability, and far removed from any intended provision model.

"The pupil still hasn't been into the building. Their education is completely outside and based around sensory regulation and relationship building."

2. Class Sizes, Complexity, and Safety Concerns

Key points

- Class sizes have increased 30–50% in recent years
- Breakout spaces, training and meeting rooms repurposed as classrooms
- Increased dysregulation, behavioural incidents, and safety risks

The rise in pupil numbers has forced the Trust to increase class sizes across its specialist provision. For pupils with profound autism, SEMH needs, and sensory processing challenges, this significantly compromises the quality and safety of provision. The school buildings leave staff with no scope to create additional spaces or specialist rooms.

Class sizes that were designed for and once supported a maximum eight pupils now routinely contain ten or eleven, or in some cases up to fourteen, leading to challenges of increased sensory overload, more frequent dysregulation, and fewer opportunities for one-to-one de-escalation. The removal of breakout areas has exacerbated these pressures, leaving no safe place for children in crisis to reset.

"A few years ago, for our most complex children, you'd have eight in a class. Now we've regularly got ten or eleven. The classrooms were built for a certain number of children, and we've had to use every additional space for other provisions, so we don't have the breakout spaces that many of those children need."

Specialist provision that was designed to balance structure, space, and intensive support is now being stretched beyond its intended parameters, limiting staff capacity to manage risk effectively.

3. Impact on Staff – Wellbeing, Training, and Recruitment

Key points

- Staff facing increasing emotional and physical strain, leading to increased staff absences
- Difficulty recruiting lower-paid but vital support staff
- Significant increase in wellbeing interventions required

The cumulative impact of rising need, larger class sizes, and inappropriate placements has placed exceptional demands on staff. Many are regularly managing behaviours that involve significant risk, including biting, scratching, and physical aggression. Staff injuries are increasingly common and can result in extended absences.

> "When you're dealing with these really complex children every day, it can become quite wearing and can impact your wellbeing. If a member of staff gets badly injured during an incident of physical aggression from a pupil, that can often lead to an absence. Even our very resilient staff can struggle."

Recruiting and retaining teaching assistants and other support staff has become increasingly difficult. The combination of low pay and high physical and emotional demands makes these roles less attractive than alternative employment in the local area.

> "People can go to Amazon and be paid more, or come here and work in a demanding/challenging environment . That's the reality we're up against."

To counter these pressures, the Trust has significantly expanded staff wellbeing support and invested in extensive training, including sensory needs, trauma-informed practice, and medical care.

4. Financial Pressures, Safety Valve Constraints, and Funding Gaps

Key points

- Specialist place funding frozen for over ten years
- Top-up funding suppressed under Safety Valve arrangements
- Local commissioners avoiding small early interventions, leading to breakdowns in placements and much more costly changes in placements
- Rising costs in ISPs intensifying pressure on local budgets

Financial pressures within the specialist system are acute. Despite rising need and growing class sizes, the core specialist place funding of £10,000 has not increased in ten years. Meanwhile, mainstream funding has risen by around 25% over the same period. Safety Valve arrangements have had the effect of forcing commissioners to place pupils on the lowest possible top-up bands, even when needs have increased.

"During the last three academic years, 86% of the new admissions were ranged at the lowest possible top-up level. This compares to only 33% six years prior. The value of the top-up hasn't increased at all in around eight years, for either specialist or mainstream settings."

This has produced untenable tension between need and funding. Small increases in TA support or therapeutic input, that could sustain placements, are often declined, only to later fund extremely high-cost independent placements when situations deteriorate.

"Rather than supporting us with relatively small increases in resourcing to maintain a placement, they don't do that. The placement breaks down, and the child ends up in an ISP - one example alone cost £2 million over the student's remaining compulsory school age."

The Trust has already cut costs to the limits of sustainability.

"We've cut everywhere we possibly can. If the Budget forces more cuts, I don't know where they would be."

5. Collapse of Multi-Agency Support Around Schools

Key points

- Social care thresholds rising; early help cases pushed onto schools
- Families First reforms risk statutory responsibilities falling on untrained school staff
- Health services limited, with schools absorbing medical risk
- Widespread gaps in speech and language and therapeutic support

Multi-agency systems around the Trust's schools have experienced significant erosion in recent years. Leaders report rising thresholds for early help and social care, limited capacity in health services, and long waits for diagnoses and therapeutic support. This shift has forced schools to assume responsibilities far beyond their remit, including welfare checks, crisis support, and complex medical decisions.

"The thresholds to get a service have just gone up and up. In early help, the expectation is around 25% of cases should be led by schools, so we have to pick that up"

The upcoming Families First reforms create additional risks, particularly if Family Help Lead Practitioner roles fall to school staff without social work backgrounds, training, or statutory authority.

"If family support practitioners are expected to be people in schools, that could be a serious case review waiting to happen. Their core purpose is to deliver education, they don't have the training, capacity, or experience to carry those cases. Schools don't have the funding to employ enough staff to carry out this and other roles that in the past were delivered by other services."

Health services are under similar pressure, leaving education staff to monitor pupils with complex medical conditions and make decisions with potentially life-threatening implications.

"We ask our education staff to make what could be life-and-death decisions. I feel guilty about what we ask them to do. If anything went wrong, how would they feel?"

Specialist schools in particular cannot operate safely without robust multi-agency support, yet much of that infrastructure has been hollowed out through spending cuts and rising demand.

6. Systemwide Impact – Pressures on Mainstream Schools

Key points

- Mainstream schools retaining pupils assessed for specialist placement
- Primary AP packages masking need until transition
- Late EHCP assessments creating crises at secondary transfer
- Parental trust in the system deteriorating

The shortage of specialist places has significant consequences for mainstream schools across the Trust and elsewhere locally. Leaders reported that every mainstream primary visited recently had at least one child whose EHCP specified a specialist placement, but with no place available, they remained on roll. This forces mainstream staff to attempt specialist interventions without training, resources, or staffing ratios to do so safely.

"In every one of our mainstream primaries, there was a child for whom specialist provision had been agreed. But there are no places, so they're being kept in mainstream, and schools are having to make specialist-type provision without the resources."

Primary schools often manage through alternative provision packages, but these cannot be replicated in secondary schools, where class sizes are larger and specialist staff fewer.

"Secondaries can't afford to replicate those AP packages for much larger cohorts. Placements then break down."

The lateness of EHCP assessments compounds the problem, with many pupils assessed only in Year 5 or 6 and arriving in secondary already in crisis. Long waits for assessment worsen this. The erosion of system capacity has also damaged parental trust.

> "Parental confidence in the system really falls away, and we've had huge numbers of vexatious complaints. Nearly always about SEND and provision not being met."

Conclusion

The Trust's experiences demonstrate the unsustainable pressures facing specialist SEND provision in areas with limited capacity and rising need. The combination of inappropriate placements, growing class sizes, reduced multi-agency support, frozen funding, workforce pressures, and national delays in expanding specialist infrastructure has created a system at breaking point.

School leaders in the Trust highlighted that plans for a new special school, intended to meet rising autism needs, had been halted by a national pause following the general election in 2024. This project had already been significantly under-scoped for local demand and was in the process of being expanded before the pause took effect. The lack of communication around the delay has added uncertainty to an already strained system.

The consequences are being felt not just in specialist settings, but across mainstream schools, families, and communities. As the UK Budget approaches, reforms that protect and strengthen SEND capacity, both operational and financial, are urgently needed. Without this, schools will continue to shoulder responsibilities they cannot safely or sustainably meet.

Summary

These are just 4 examples of the daily struggles that schools in the North East face due to insufficient funding, the increasing demand for SEND and the lack of support from other services.

Government must address the funding pressures throughout the education system, invest in SEND capacity, multi-agency services and early intervention to prevent the most vulnerable children in this region being affected.

Schools North East calls on MPs, policymakers, and the media to use these case studies as a demonstration of the current crisis, and to amplify the call for urgent action for a more sustainable funding settlement for North East education.

For more information on Schools North East's work and to download a copy of our manifesto visit:

www.schoolsnortheast.org

From our Schools North East Manifesto our recommendations are:

1. Recognise the regional context

2. Promote a positive narrative around North East education

3. Depoliticise Education

4. Evidence-based policy making

5. Long-term view

6. Greater Support for Early Years

7. A joined up approach from cabinet to the chalkface

8. Support North East school staff at every level

9. Ensure all pupils can access an appropriate curriculum

10. Targeted support for those with the greatest needs