

# Stakeholder Information Briefing

## Schools North East

Schools North East is a charity set up in 2007 by schools and for schools. We are a movement for change, giving a voice to all 1,150 North East schools in the national debate. Visit [schoolsnortheast.org](https://schoolsnortheast.org) for more information.

These briefings are designed to give a snapshot of the views of schools and school leaders within our network. This information is collected through a variety of means, whether through surveys, roundtables, or the regular feedback we receive from partner schools.

The views reported are those of schools in the North East, and don't necessarily represent our definitive policy position. For more information about our policy work, please visit the [policy page](#) of our website. The focus of our policy work is summarised in our [Manifesto for North East Education](#). If you are interested in further engagement with our policy work, please email [policy@schoolsnortheast.com](mailto:policy@schoolsnortheast.com). Information in this document is private and confidential and is not to be shared with any third party. This document is the intellectual property of Schools North East.

## Roundtable with Blyth and Ashington MP Ian Lavery June 2026

### SUMMARY

Schools North East holds regular roundtables with school leaders. This briefing covers the feedback from a roundtable on the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2026, with Ian Lavery MP and school leaders from the Blyth and Ashington constituency.

### KEY POINTS

**SEND Reform** - The dominant theme throughout the roundtable was SEND reform and the challenge of delivering greater inclusion within mainstream schools. School leaders broadly supported the principle of enabling more children to receive support within mainstream education wherever appropriate. However, they stressed that inclusion cannot simply become an aspiration without the staffing, specialist expertise, buildings, and funding required to make it successful.

**Inclusion beyond SEND** - School leaders stressed that inclusion is about far more than statutory SEND provision. Many of the pupils presenting the greatest challenges do not necessarily meet thresholds for specialist support but nevertheless require significant interventions.

**Parental perceptions** - Several leaders highlighted the growing disconnect between schools and some families regarding SEND support. School leaders stressed that they are working hard to secure the best possible support for children, yet increasingly find themselves in conflict with parents who believe schools are withholding assistance.

**Accountability and inclusion** - Leaders expressed concern that current accountability arrangements remain fundamentally misaligned with the ambitions of SEND reform. Head Teachers argued that while national policy increasingly encourages inclusive practice, schools continue to be judged through accountability measures that often penalise those serving the most disadvantaged and complex communities.

**Financial pressures** - Head Teachers described growing financial pressures across both primary and secondary education. Schools are increasingly expected to deliver more complex provision while operating within funding settlements that have failed to keep pace with rising costs. Leaders also highlighted the practical barriers created by ageing or unsuitable school buildings.

**Schools workforce** - Head Teachers discussed the need to ensure that the education workforce is equipped for the realities of today's classrooms.

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## In Depth Analysis

### *Foreword*

Schools North East would like to thank Ian Lavery MP for his continued engagement with us and school leaders across his constituency, and for the openness and genuine engagement he brought to the discussion.

Opportunities for Heads and school staff to speak directly with their parliamentarians are highly valued, and the candour recorded in this write-up reflects the trust leaders placed in the conversation. Ian's continued commitment to the schools and children of his constituency, and to the wider North East, is warmly appreciated.

This briefing is an honest account of the pressures leaders described - pressures directed not at any individual, but at a system that is asking schools to do more than current funding, workforce and specialist services allow.

The tone of the roundtable was one of deep concern around the school system. School leaders were united in the view that the education system, particularly around SEND, is under unprecedented strain, with many describing it as reaching a tipping point. Participants spoke candidly about increasing levels of need, diminishing resources, and the growing expectation that schools should compensate for shortcomings elsewhere in the system. There was a shared frustration that the ambitions of recent policy announcements, particularly around inclusion, are not yet being matched by the funding, specialist workforce, or wider public services needed to make them deliverable. There was a clear sense that school leaders remain committed to delivering inclusive education and improving outcomes for children, but they felt increasingly stretched by a system that relies on schools to absorb pressures that should be shared across public services.

### *SEND Reform*

The dominant theme throughout the roundtable was SEND reform and the challenge of delivering greater inclusion within mainstream schools. School leaders broadly supported the principle of enabling more children to receive support within mainstream education wherever appropriate. However, they stressed that inclusion cannot simply become an aspiration without the staffing, specialist expertise, buildings, and funding required to make it successful.

Head Teachers highlighted that many mainstream schools are already supporting increasing numbers of pupils with highly complex needs, often without access to the specialist provision available in dedicated SEND settings. While additional inclusion funding was welcomed, leaders argued that the scale of current investment falls significantly short of what schools require to deliver genuinely inclusive provision.

Concerns were also raised that the reforms risk focusing too heavily on reducing demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) without sufficiently addressing the underlying shortage of specialist places and support. Leaders emphasised that the crisis facing the SEND system is not one of poor-quality provision, but one of capacity. Local authorities continue to face significant financial pressures because demand for specialist places far exceeds supply, forcing increasing reliance on expensive independent provision rather than expanding maintained specialist capacity.

### *Inclusion beyond SEND*

School leaders stressed that inclusion is about far more than statutory SEND provision. Many of the pupils presenting the greatest challenges do not necessarily meet thresholds for specialist support but nevertheless require significant intervention around attendance, mental health, emotional wellbeing, and family circumstances. Head Teachers highlighted what they described as the "space between" school provision and statutory services, where many vulnerable children receive insufficient support despite facing substantial barriers to learning.

Leaders described increasing numbers of pupils experiencing emotionally based school avoidance, anxiety and wider mental health difficulties. Behaviour was consistently described as a symptom of underlying need rather than a cause in itself. While schools continue to expand their pastoral offer, they cannot replace wider public services. Greater coordination between education, health, and family support services will be essential if inclusion is to become a reality for all children, not simply those with formal diagnoses.

### *Parental perceptions*

Several leaders highlighted the growing disconnect between schools and some families regarding SEND support. Head Teachers reported that many parents understandably see an EHCP as the only route to securing appropriate support for their child. However, schools explained that there remains widespread misunderstanding about what different levels of SEND support schools can realistically provide, with some families believing that an EHCP automatically guarantees one-to-one provision or significant additional funding.

School leaders stressed that they are working hard to secure the best possible support for children, yet increasingly find themselves in conflict with parents who believe schools are withholding assistance. Greater transparency about how SEND funding operates, alongside improved public understanding of the wider system, was identified as an important part of rebuilding trust between schools, families and local services.

### *Accountability and inclusion*

Leaders expressed concern that current accountability arrangements remain fundamentally misaligned with the ambitions of SEND reform. Head Teachers argued that while national policy increasingly encourages inclusive practice, schools continue to be judged through accountability measures that often penalise those serving the most disadvantaged and complex communities.

Attendance was highlighted as a particular concern, with leaders noting that schools working with high levels of deprivation, face significantly greater challenges around SEND and emotionally based school avoidance, and as such greater challenges in improving attendance than schools serving more affluent communities.

School leaders welcomed recent recognition that attainment data should increasingly reflect context but questioned why similar thinking has not yet been applied to attendance measures. They argued that schools should be recognised for the progress they make with highly vulnerable pupils rather than judged solely against national benchmarks.

More broadly, accountability remains one of the strongest levers in changing the education system. Unless inspection, accountability, and SEND policy become fully aligned, leaders warned that schools will continue to face conflicting incentives that undermine the Government's ambitions for greater inclusion.

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### *Financial Pressures*

Alongside SEND, Head Teachers described growing financial pressures across both primary and secondary education. Schools are increasingly expected to deliver more complex provision while operating within funding settlements that have failed to keep pace with rising costs. Leaders reported growing concern about the erosion of high-needs funding, static levels of core SEND funding and declining value of top-up payments.

Several schools also described the combined impact of falling pupil rolls and increasing complexity of need. While lower pupil numbers reduce overall funding, the pupils remaining within mainstream schools often require significantly greater levels of support, creating an increasingly unsustainable financial position.

Primary schools, particularly those in communities experiencing demographic decline, described the challenge of maintaining staffing levels while supporting growing numbers of pupils with SEND and additional needs. Leaders warned that without changes to funding arrangements, many schools will struggle to maintain the breadth and quality of provision currently available.

### *Buildings and capacity*

Leaders also highlighted the practical barriers created by ageing or unsuitable school buildings. Many schools are operating on sites that are no longer fit for modern educational requirements, particularly where inclusive provision requires specialist learning environments, sensory spaces, or flexible intervention areas.

While some capital funding has been secured locally, schools often reported having to contribute substantial resources themselves to adapt buildings for increasing levels of need. If mainstream schools are expected to educate more pupils with complex SEND, future capital investment must reflect the changing role of school estates.

In the recent round of bids for the condition improvement fund (CIF), only 29% of North East schools eligible for the condition improvement fund applied, the lowest in England. Despite these low numbers of applications, the North East had the lowest rates of success. Of the 55 North East schools that applied (representing 72 projects) only 25% were successful, compared with 40% nationally.

The figures are even lower for funds received for the successful projects. Of funding applied for by our region's schools, only 19% has been awarded. London had the highest rate of funding awarded at nearly 40%. The condition of the school estate, and the difficulties in accessing funds in areas of high need, highlights the wider structural divides between the North East and the South, which are beyond the control of schools but impact on educational outcomes.

### *Schools workforce*

Head Teachers discussed the need to ensure that the education workforce is equipped for the realities of today's classrooms. Leaders argued that initial teacher training and early career development should place greater emphasis on inclusive practice, behaviour, SEND, and working in communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage. With classroom complexity continuing to increase, schools require teachers entering the profession with a stronger understanding of the diverse needs they are likely to encounter.

Throughout the discussion, leaders emphasised that schools have become far more than places of education. Schools increasingly act as trusted community institutions, supporting families with

safeguarding, welfare, mental health, attendance, food insecurity, and wider social challenges. This has placed Head Teachers in the role of civic leaders, coordinating support across multiple agencies while continuing to deliver high-quality education. Rather than expecting schools to replace public services, leaders called for greater recognition of the strategic role schools play within their communities and stronger integration with health, social care and wider family support services.