

# 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 Blaydon and Consett MP Liz Twist June 2026

### SUMMARY

Schools North East holds regular roundtables with school leaders. This briefing covers the feedback from a roundtable on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2026, with Liz Twist MP and school leaders from the Blaydon and Consett constituency.

### KEY POINTS

**Early Years** - Schools reported seeing increasing numbers of children arriving with delayed speech and language development, weaker social and emotional skills, difficulties with toilet training, limited vocabulary and poorer health outcomes. Leaders stressed that nursery settings play a critical role in identifying additional needs early, enabling interventions to be put in place before children reach primary school age.

**SEND Pressures** - The sharp rise in children presenting with additional needs was identified as one of the most significant challenges facing schools. Leaders described increasing numbers of pupils arriving in mainstream settings with complex needs, including children who are non-verbal, not toilet trained, or requiring intensive support.

**Delays in Accessing Specialist Support** - A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the difficulty and delays schools face in accessing specialist services and expert support. These delays highlight the structural divides that exist between the North and the South outside of the school gates but impact on educational outcomes.

**Teaching Assistants** - School leaders spoke about the role of teaching assistants and support staff in maintaining inclusive education. However, leaders warned that recruitment and retention challenges are becoming increasingly severe.

**Financial Sustainability** - School leaders described a funding environment in which schools have already exhausted most opportunities for efficiency savings. Leaders reported reducing staffing, delaying investment and operating with minimal budgets for several years, leaving little scope for further savings without affecting provision.

**Small and Rural Schools** - Leaders highlighted the particular pressures facing smaller schools and those experiencing falling pupil rolls. With declining pupil numbers affecting funding allocations, many schools are increasingly operating mixed-age classes while attempting to meet growing levels of need.

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## In Depth Analysis

### *Foreword*

Schools North East would like to thank Liz Twist MP for her continued engagement with us and school leaders across her constituency, and for the openness and genuine engagement she 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. Liz's continued commitment to the schools and children of her 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 genuine concern, frustration, and urgency. School leaders spoke about the growing gap between the ambitions of government policy and the reality of delivering education on the ground. There was a strong sense that schools are being asked to solve increasingly complex social, health and educational challenges without the funding, workforce or external services needed to do so. School leaders described a system under sustained pressure, particularly in relation to SEND, early years, school funding and access to specialist support, with many feeling that schools have become the default service for issues that extend well beyond education.

### *Early Years Funding Risks Widening Educational Inequalities*

School leaders raised significant concerns regarding the expansion of childcare entitlements and the differing access to funded nursery provision between working and non-working families, with the former being able to access 30 funded hours of childcare and the latter 15 hours.

Schools serving some of the region's most disadvantaged communities warned that children from low-income households are increasingly receiving substantially fewer hours in educational settings before starting school. One Head Teacher had calculated that a child with working parents taking up the full 30 hours of childcare entitlement, from nine months, would have 4680 hours in a nursery setting before starting primary school. However, a child from a pupil premium background with 15 hours of childcare entitlements, from three years old, would only have 585 hours in an education setting before starting primary school.<sup>1</sup> Leaders highlighted the potential for this to widen existing attainment gaps before children even enter Reception.

Schools reported seeing increasing numbers of children arriving with delayed speech and language development, weaker social and emotional skills, difficulties with toilet training, limited vocabulary and poorer health outcomes. Leaders stressed that nursery settings play a critical role in identifying additional needs early, enabling interventions to be put in place before children reach primary school age.

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<sup>1</sup> These figures were quoted in the roundtable discussion by a school leader. This is based on the entitlement for working parents v. universal offer. More information on how this is calculated:

- Working-parent child (15h from 9 months, 30h from 12 months): ~3,560 to ~4,600 hours by reception entry. Cohort midpoint ~4,100 hours.
- Universal offer only (15h from age 3, no additional eligibility): ~570 to ~1,080 hours. Midpoint ~820.

There was concern that schools serving disadvantaged communities may find themselves facing larger readiness-to-learn gaps whilst simultaneously receiving less funding than schools in more affluent areas where greater numbers of families qualify for the 30 hours of funded childcare entitlements.

Head Teachers argued that investing more heavily in early intervention would not only improve outcomes for children but reduce future costs associated with attendance support, specialist interventions and SEND provision.

#### *SEND Pressures Continue to Escalate*

The sharp rise in children presenting with additional needs was identified as one of the most significant challenges facing schools. Leaders described increasing numbers of pupils arriving in mainstream settings with complex needs, including children who are non-verbal, not toilet trained, or requiring intensive support. In many cases, mainstream schools are expected to provide highly specialised provision despite lacking the staffing, training, and resources that are available within specialist settings.

As well as these pressures in mainstream schools, Head Teachers expressed concern that the capacity of specialist provision across the region has not kept pace with rising demand. As a result, mainstream schools are increasingly being required to support children whose needs would previously have been met elsewhere. School leaders stressed that they remain committed to inclusive education, but many reported feeling unable to provide the level of support children require because of limitations in funding, staffing and access to external expertise.

There was also concern about the sustainability of the wider SEND system. Despite recent government intervention to address local authority deficits, school leaders noted that high-needs budgets remain under significant pressure and that demand continues to outstrip available capacity.

#### *Delays in Accessing Specialist Support*

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the difficulty schools face in accessing specialist services and expert support. While Head Teachers welcomed proposals within the Schools White Paper to improve access to specialist expertise through the "Experts at Hand" model, many questioned whether sufficient workforce capacity exists to make the programme effective.

School leaders described lengthy waiting times for specialist assessments and interventions, including mental health support services, speech and language provision, and wider SEND-related services. An example was shared of one child still waiting for specialist assessment following a referral in December 2021. During these lengthy referral times, schools continue to manage increasingly complex needs with limited support.

These delays highlight the structural divides that exist between the North and the South outside of the school gates but impact on educational outcomes. In too many communities in our region, schools are being held accountable for poverty, poor transport, limited local employment opportunities, reduced youth services, stretched mental health provision, and a SEND system under extreme pressure.

Concerns were also raised about fragmented communication between schools, health services, and other agencies. Leaders reported instances where parents were advised by GPs to seek support through schools for issues that schools themselves were unable to address without specialist input. There was strong agreement that while schools are willing to play their part, successful implementation of SEND reforms will require significant investment in specialist services beyond the school gates.

### *Teaching Assistants Under Increasing Pressure*

School leaders spoke about the role of teaching assistants and support staff in maintaining inclusive education. Head Teachers described TAs as the backbone of many schools, often supporting children with the highest levels of need while also undertaking wider pastoral, behavioural, and welfare responsibilities.

However, leaders warned that recruitment and retention challenges are becoming increasingly severe. Rising living costs mean many experienced support staff are leaving education for better-paid roles elsewhere, despite their commitment to working with children.

Schools reported particular concerns about the mismatch between the growing complexity of pupil needs and the pay, training, and professional recognition available to support staff. Leaders stressed that without a sustainable workforce strategy for TAs, and a recognition of the vocational element of TA and support staff work, ambitions around inclusion and SEND reform will be difficult to achieve.

### *Financial Sustainability Reaching Crisis Point*

An especially striking message from the roundtable was the level of concern regarding school finances. School leaders described a funding environment in which schools have already exhausted most opportunities for efficiency savings. Leaders reported reducing staffing, delaying investment and operating with minimal budgets for several years, leaving little scope for further savings without affecting provision.

One school, that had previously never run a deficit budget, is projecting a deficit of over £80,000 this year, rising to over £800,000 in 2029. This is despite losing three TAs last year and a further two this summer. The school has had to reduce its TA team by 50%, which was only possible due to recent falls in pupil numbers. Should SEND increase in this setting, the school would have no flexibility to meet additional needs.

Several Head Teachers shared concerns about rapidly growing deficit budgets, despite having previously maintained balanced finances for many years. School leaders stressed that rising costs, workforce pressures, and increasing pupil needs are creating financial challenges that cannot be addressed through efficiency measures alone.

School leaders questioned how schools will be expected to deliver new initiatives and reforms while simultaneously managing escalating deficits. There was widespread concern that discussions around "maximising value" risk overlooking the reality that many schools are already operating with the minimum staffing and resources required to function. Schools cannot continue to absorb additional responsibilities without corresponding investment.

### *Small and Rural Schools Facing Additional Challenges*

Leaders highlighted the particular pressures facing smaller schools and those experiencing falling pupil rolls. With declining pupil numbers affecting funding allocations, many schools are increasingly operating mixed-age classes while attempting to meet growing levels of need. National funding approaches do not always adequately reflect the realities faced by smaller schools, particularly in areas experiencing demographic change.

The North East faces particularly acute challenges on falling pupil numbers, as highlighted in the most recent school capacity data from the Department for Education. By 2029/30, primary pupil numbers in our region are due to fall by 6.4%, the third largest drop in England and above the national average decline of 4.9%.

Previous research by the Education Policy Institute highlighted the financial impact of falling school rolls. The EPI projected the North East to have the greatest decline in pupil numbers, of 12.7%, between 2022/23 and 2028/29. This would mean a decline of 9% in primary funding for our region over the same period, the largest funding decrease in England.