



Case Study: East Sussex County Council – Early Years SEND Support and High Needs Block Investment

1. Introduction

East Sussex County Council has developed a long-standing and highly collaborative model of early years Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support, funded through the High Needs Block (HNB) of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG). The model demonstrates how sustained investment in early identification, inclusive practice and multi-agency working can strengthen outcomes for children with SEND before they enter statutory school age provision.

This case study explores the structure and development of the SEND Early Years Service in East Sussex, the services provided to early years settings and families, the emerging evidence of impact, and the future direction of the work in line with Best Start for Life and Family Hub developments.

2. Background

The SEND Early Years Service in East Sussex has been in operation for more than a decade and is funded through the High Needs Block. The service was originally developed following reforms linked to the SEND Code of Practice and a recognition that early intervention and inclusive practice were essential to improving long-term outcomes for children with SEND.

East Sussex is a predominantly coastal and partly rural local authority in the South East of England, comprising five districts (Eastbourne, Hastings, Lewes, Rother and Wealden), with much of its population concentrated along the southern coastal strip, and a total population of approximately 560,900, including around 104,000 children and young people aged 0–17. The county covers a large and geographically dispersed area, including significant rural and semi-rural communities as well as urban coastal towns, meaning

that—despite having similar population numbers to some other local authorities—its population is spread across a much wider footprint, which creates additional challenges for access to services and childcare sufficiency. Early years provision in East Sussex is delivered through a mixed market of private, voluntary, independent and school-based providers, with approximately 86% of provision delivered by the PVI sector and an average cohort of around 5,000 children entering primary school each year, shaped by local birth rates and demographic trends.

Unlike areas with a large number of school-based nurseries or local authority maintained provision, this structure created a need for a coordinated local authority-led approach to ensure consistency, inclusion and compliance with SEND responsibilities across the sector.

The service is organised into three locality teams covering:

- Lewes, Coastal and Wealden
- Eastbourne and Hailsham
- Hastings, Rother and Rye

Each locality team includes:

- Advisers, who are qualified teachers
- A team leader
- Practitioners with Level 3 and Level 4 qualifications

The service operates through a referral-based model for individual children, as well as capacity building support to develop whole-setting practice. These support early years settings to identify and meet the needs of children with SEND as early as possible.

The current Deputy Service Manager, Jake Perry, described the service as being rooted in a long-standing belief that investment in the early years leads to better long-term educational and social outcomes for children and reduces pressures later within schools and specialist provision.

3. Services Offered

Early Identification and Inclusion Support

A core function of the service is supporting early years providers to develop inclusive practice and strengthen their capacity to identify and support children with SEND.

Each setting is linked to an Adviser who meets with them three times a year. These meetings focus on:

- Early identification processes
- Implementation of the graduated approach
- Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycles
- Strategic development planning
- Training needs in relation to SEND in the early years
- Access to advice and guidance before referral

This proactive approach enables settings to identify concerns earlier and seek support before needs escalate.

Direct Practitioner Support

Practitioners provide direct support within early years settings. Following assessment visits, an additional needs plan is developed outlining:

- The child's identified needs
- Recommended strategies
- Required support arrangements

Over time, the service has evolved from an individual child-focused model towards a cohort-based approach. This change reflects increasing demand, limited staffing growth and a focus on inclusive practice across the sector. Rather than solely working directly with individual children, practitioners now model inclusive practice for staff teams to build sustainable capacity across the sector.

This model aims to ensure that skills and knowledge remain within settings and benefit wider groups of children over time.

High Needs Funding and Transition Support

East Sussex has secured significant investment from the High Needs Block to support children in the early years. This includes:

- SEN Enhanced Inclusion Fund (SENELF) to support early years providers with high needs children (with or without an EHCP)
- School Start Transition Funding to support cohorts of children moving into school

Transition funding is particularly significant as it supports schools receiving children with high levels of need who do not yet have EHCPs. Schools receive financial packages alongside transition planning support to enable smoother entry into Reception.

4. Learning and Impact

Multi-Agency Working

A major strength of the East Sussex model is its embedded multi-agency approach.

The SEND Early Years Service works closely with:

- Health visiting teams
- Speech and language therapy services
- Occupational therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Community hubs
- Child Development Clinics

Monthly partnership meetings are used to:

- Share information
- Identify gaps in provision
- Coordinate support pathways
- Monitor children with complex needs

The service has also developed shared pathways for specific groups of children, including:

- Children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD)
- Autistic children without functional communication systems
- Children requiring speech and language intervention
- Emerging pathways for children with Down's syndrome

This collaborative structure ensures that children are identified early and that support is coordinated across services.

Identification and Reach

A detailed review of Reception cohort data found that the service was supporting approximately 7% of the entire Reception population entering school. These are children towards the top end of SEN support and those with EHCPs.

Importantly, analysis suggests that only a very small number of children with significant SEND needs enter Reception without prior identification by services. In the 2025–2026 academic year, approximately 20 children out of the 5,000 who transitioned into Reception—and out of the 350 children supported by the SEND Early Years Service—were identified as having high needs and were not known to any services prior to starting school. This represents approximately 0.4% of the total cohort and around 5.7% of those supported by the SEND Early Years Service.

This provided reassurance that the system was effectively identifying the vast majority of children with high levels of need before school entry.

Over the past year, the SEND Early Years Service has worked to extend its reach by strengthening partnerships with health, social care and community teams, ensuring that children with higher levels of need are identified early and supported effectively into school. As a result of this proactive, multi-agency approach, the service will support over 400 children with their transition into Reception in the 2026 academic year.

Successful Transitions

Feedback from schools consistently highlighted that early identification and shared planning led to more successful transitions into school.

Schools reported that children were better supported when:

- Information was shared early and was in a format that aligns with school processes
- Additional visits were arranged
- Families were engaged before school entry
- Funding and support plans were in place

Where difficulties arose, they were most commonly linked to children who had not previously accessed early years provision or whose needs had not been identified before Reception entry.

The Importance of Relationships

A key learning point from the East Sussex approach is the importance of strong professional relationships. These are key as the success of the model relies heavily on:

- Trust between agencies
- Regular communication
- Shared ownership of outcomes
- Clear referral pathways

Without strong relationships, it would be impossible for these to be supported.

The service also identified that sustained advocacy for early years investment has been critical in maintaining High Needs Block funding over time.

Best Start for Life and Family Hubs

The introduction of Best Start for Life and Family Hub developments has strengthened the visibility of early years work within the wider local authority system.

East Sussex identified that many of the partnership structures promoted nationally through Best Start for Life were already established locally. However, the programme has provided:

- Greater strategic recognition
- Additional opportunities for integration
- Small-scale funding enhancements
- Improved support for families not accessing early education provision

Family Hubs are also helping to strengthen support for families within the home environment, complementing the education-focused SEND service offer.

Next Steps

East Sussex County Council continues to refine and strengthen its early years SEND offer.

Current and future priorities include:

- Developing more robust impact and outcomes data linked to funding
- Reviewing long-term EHCP trends
- Analysing exclusion and attendance patterns in Reception
- Expanding specialist pathways for specific SEND profiles
- Strengthening support for families not accessing early education provision
- Enhancing integration between Family Hubs and SEND services
- Analysing data on children not known to services who arrive in Reception, to explore how the system can be strengthened to support earlier identification of all children with SEND
- Developing an Early Years Universal and Additional Practice (UAP) framework to support the sector in strengthening inclusive practice

The local authority also plans to continue developing research-informed approaches and targeted pathways for children with complex needs.

As national SEND reforms progress, the East Sussex model demonstrates how sustained investment in early intervention, workforce development and multi-agency collaboration can create a strong foundation for inclusive practice and improved outcomes for children with SEND.