

SEND Reform: What Hertfordshire Parents Told Us

Thank you to everyone who joined our SEND Reform discussion sessions on 21–22 April. As always, your insight and lived experience shaped a powerful picture of what families are worried about — and what you want decision-makers to hear.

Across both sessions, parents shared consistent themes, strong concerns and a deep desire for a system that truly works for children and young people with SEND.

Here's what you told us.

1. Protecting Legal Rights Matters Deeply

Parents were clear: the SEND Tribunal is one of the only parts of the system that consistently works.

Many families said they would not have the support their child has today without the tribunal process. The idea that tribunal powers could be reduced — especially the ability to name a school — caused significant anxiety.

Parents told us:

- Without tribunal oversight, there is no independent check on local authority decisions.
- ISPs (Individual Support Plans) must be legally enforceable, otherwise they risk becoming “plans on paper”.
- Families fear being offered schools that are unsuitable or far away, with no meaningful way to challenge it.

2. Accountability Must Not Fall on Schools Alone

Parents were worried that responsibility for delivering support is shifting from the local authority to schools — without the funding, staffing or independence needed to make it work.

You told us:

- Complaining to your child's school is emotionally difficult and risks damaging relationships.
- School complaints processes are not independent, especially in small schools where governors may also be fellow parents.
- If ISPs aren't enforceable, families may be pushed into disability discrimination claims, which are harder and more stressful to navigate.

Parents were clear:

Accountability must sit with the system, not individual families.

3. Funding and Workforce Shortages Are a Major Barrier

Parents repeatedly said the reforms cannot succeed without addressing the severe shortages in:

- Educational psychologists
- Speech and language therapists
- Occupational therapists
- Specialist teachers

- SENCO capacity

You told us:

- Schools already struggle to meet needs even when support is legally required.
- Without enough trained professionals, the “experts-at-hand” model feels unrealistic.

One parent summed it up:

“They want to put her back in the ‘stupid room’. There just isn’t the support.”

4. Post-16 and Post-19 Support Feels Overlooked

Families with older teens felt particularly anxious.

You told us:

- There is very little clarity about what support will look like after age 16 or 19.
- Colleges are already stretched and may not be able to meet needs.
- Parents fear that progress could be used as a reason to remove an EHCP.

This group needs much clearer protections.

5. Early Identification, Inclusion and School Culture

Parents described huge differences between schools — sometimes even between classrooms.

You told us:

- Teachers need more training to recognise needs early.
- Behaviour policies often clash with SEND needs.
- Children who mask or have fluctuating needs are frequently missed.
- Access to SENCOs varies widely, and some families on SEN Support struggle to get any time at all.

Parents welcomed the idea of national inclusion standards — but stressed that they must be monitored, funded and meaningful.

6. Children Not in School (EBSNA, anxiety, EOTAS)

Many parents said this group is almost invisible in the proposals.

You told us:

- There is no clear plan for children who cannot attend school due to anxiety or unmet needs.
- Attendance codes still don’t reflect SEND-related absence.
- More families are turning to home education out of desperation, not choice.

7. Equity and Seldom-Heard Groups

Parents raised concerns about groups who may be disproportionately affected, including:

- Care-experienced children
- Children with trauma backgrounds
- Children with regressive or fluctuating conditions
- Families who cannot afford private assessments
- Parents with limited English or additional needs

You told us that reforms must not widen existing inequalities.

8. Trust, Transparency and the Consultation Process

Parents expressed frustration with the consultation itself.

You told us:

- Some questions feel leading or assume agreement.
- Key terms like “complex needs” are not defined.
- Families feel exhausted by repeated reforms and unclear promises.
- Trust in the system is low — and will only be rebuilt through visible, meaningful change.

In Summary

Parents across Hertfordshire were united in their message:

We want a SEND system that is fair, funded, accountable and centred on children’s needs — not one that relies on parents fighting for every step.

Your feedback will shape HPCI’s response to the consultation and will be shared (anonymously) with the National Network of Parent Carer Forums to influence national discussions.