

Summary of Key Themes from HPCI's EOTAS Consultation Webinars

On 10 September, HPCI hosted two webinars for parent carers in Hertfordshire to discuss the current Government consultation about Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) and Alternative Provision. The consultation closes on 18 September, and [you can access it here](#).

The slides from the sessions are available [here](#) and the main points raised during the discussion are summarised below. We will use these to inform the HPCI response to the consultation, and we hope families will find this helpful if they want to put in a response of their own.

Overarching Themes

Across both sessions, parents emphasised the importance of:

- Child-led decision making
- Trauma-informed practice
- Realistic expectations
- Consistency across schools and services
- Genuine accountability
- Protecting legal rights
- Avoiding one-size-fits-all solutions
- Recognising the complexity of children on EOTAS

Above all, parents want a system that works for children and with families, not against them.

In more detail:

1. The Starting Point: Understanding the consultation

Parents repeatedly said the consultation is hard to understand, especially because:

- It relies heavily on the earlier SEND reform proposals, which many families found unclear.
- Key parts of the future system (e.g., specialist provision packages, individual support plans, “experts at hand”) are not yet defined.
- Some consultation questions assume decisions have already been made (e.g., that schools will manage EOTAS), even though this is still supposedly up for debate.

Parents felt they were being asked to comment on a system that does not yet exist, making meaningful feedback difficult.

2. Who Should Decide and Manage EOTAS?

Parents challenged the idea that schools should decide whether a child receives EOTAS and then manage it day-to-day.

Key concerns:

- Many children on EOTAS have been traumatised by school; returning decision-making power to schools feels unsafe.
- Schools are already overwhelmed, understaffed, and may lack specialist knowledge.
- Managing EOTAS requires skills in commissioning, contract management, SEND expertise, therapy coordination, and safeguarding — a combination parents felt many schools simply do not have.

Parents preferred a model where decisions are made by people who genuinely know the child, such as specialist teams, trusted professionals, or a dedicated LA EOTAS service.

3. Reintegration

Parents were clear: reintegration must never be forced.

Themes included:

- Reintegration should only happen if the child wants it, and at a pace they can manage.
- Trauma must be recognised — both the child's and the family's.
- Schools may underestimate the emotional impact of previous experiences.
- The current culture of schools (noise, crowds, behaviour systems, attendance pressure) remains a major barrier.
- A “step-by-step” approach may help, but only if it is genuinely child-centred and not driven by attendance targets or school pressure.

Parents asked: *Why change something that is working?*

4. Loss of Tribunal Rights

Parents were deeply concerned about proposals to remove the right to appeal EOTAS decisions at SEND Tribunal.

Key points:

- Complaining to the school is not independent and risks damaging relationships.
- Governors are not SEND specialists; decisions could be made by people with no relevant expertise.
- The proposed “independent person” could be a SENCO from another school — who may not be able to be independent themselves.
- Removing tribunal rights reduces accountability and leaves families vulnerable.

Parents described this as a significant step backwards for children's rights.

5. Quality Assurance

Parents agreed that EOTAS providers should meet basic national safeguarding and quality standards, but warned:

- Many excellent small providers (e.g., stables, tutors, therapy centres) could be pushed out if requirements are too heavy.
- A lead-in period and support would be essential.
- Quality assurance must focus on actual outcomes, not just paperwork.
- Parents and children should be asked regularly for feedback — they see what happens day-to-day.

Several parents shared experiences of “approved” providers delivering very poor education with little accountability.

6. Existing EOTAS Arrangements: Older Children

Parents welcomed the proposal that secondary and post-16 pupils already on EOTAS would keep their arrangements.

They emphasised:

- Many older children are on EOTAS because of severe trauma.
- Removing EOTAS at this stage could be harmful and unrealistic.
- Post-16 support already drops sharply for many; protections must not be weakened further.

7. Primary-Aged Children

Parents struggled to see how a child who needs EOTAS in primary could suddenly:

- lose their EHCP,
- lose EOTAS,
- and reintegrate into mainstream secondary.

Concerns included:

- Secondary school is a huge leap, even for neurotypical children.
- Needs often increase at puberty.
- Many children on EOTAS have never been able to enter a school building — this will not change simply because they turn 11.

8. Mental Health and Alternative Provision

Parents described widespread problems with mental health support:

- CAMHS waiting lists are long.
- ESMA (medical absence support) can work well for short-term physical illness but may not be fit for long-term mental health needs.
- Schools respond inconsistently — some treat mental health as SEND, others as behaviour, others as attendance.
- Families are often left to navigate complex systems alone.

Parents called for a coherent, joined-up approach with specialist teams who can intervene early.

9. Online Alternative Provision

Parents strongly disagreed with the proposed 12-week limit.

Key points:

- Many children need longer-term online learning (e.g., GCSE courses).
- Time limits create unnecessary churn and paperwork.
- Online learning worked well for many children during COVID; it should not be dismissed.
- Whether a child stays on a school roll should depend on individual circumstances, not a blanket rule.

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