

SENCOs

Introduction

The special educational needs and disability (SEND) Code of Practice has been revised to reflect the changes to legislation, regulations and Coalition Government policy.

The Code of Practice provides statutory guidance on what local authorities, health and social care services, schools, colleges and other education and training providers, and individual staff working in those settings (a) must do and (b) should do to implement the reforms.

The main changes

- Young people or parents of a child with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan have the right to request a personal budget for the additional support that the child, young person or family needs. The personal budget may be a 'notional fund', where the school or local authority holds the funds and commissions the support specified in the EHC plan, or a direct payment. In the case of direct payments, the young person or family receives the money to contract, purchase and manage services themselves.
- The statement of special educational needs (SEN) is replaced by an EHC plan. The EHC plan also replaces Learning Difficulty Assessments (LDAs) for young people post-16. EHC plans are broader than statements of SEN and also cover education-related health and social care provision. The EHC plan has a greater focus on outcomes than the statement of SEN.
- The Code of Practice is extended to cover both children and young people with SEN and children and young people with disabilities.
- The Code of Practice identifies four broad areas of need: communication and interaction, cognition and learning, sensory and/or physical needs, and social, emotional and mental health difficulties. The Code of Practice no longer makes reference to behavioural difficulties.
- The categories of School Action and School Action Plus are replaced by a single category of SEN for all of those who do not have an EHC plan.
- The Code of Practice now covers children and young people from birth to 25.
- Parents and young people must be consulted and participate in decisions about issues that affect them/their child. This includes decisions about how money will be used to fund support and strategic decision making.
- Local authorities are required to prepare and publish a Local Offer. The Local Offer sets out the support available to children, young people and their families locally. It should identify and respond to the needs of children, young people who have SEND and their families.
- Schools are required to publish an SEN information report on their website. This sets out how they support pupils with SEN.
- The independent and voluntary sectors play a greater role in the design and delivery of provision for children and young people with SEN.

- Local authorities and partner commissioning bodies in health and social care are required to co-operate and make joint arrangements for commissioning education, health and care provision for children and young people with SEN.

The SENCO role

The SENCO has day-to-day responsibility for the operation of the SEN policy and co-ordination of specific provision made to support individual pupils with SEN, including those who have EHC plans.

The SENCO provides professional guidance to teachers, school leaders and other staff within the school. They also work closely with parents and external agencies.

The Code of Practice acknowledges that some very small primary schools may share a SENCO to work across schools. The Code of Practice makes it clear that the 'shared SENCO' role should not be carried out by a headteacher.

What SENCOs must do

The SENCO must be a qualified teacher. Since 2009, SENCOs who are newly appointed to the role must gain the National Award for Special Educational Needs Co-ordination. This must be gained within three years of appointment.

The SENCO must maintain an overview of the programmes and interventions to support different groups of pupils, including monitoring their impact and effectiveness.

What SENCOs should do

The SENCO should play a role in determining the strategic development of SEN policy and provision in the school. The Code of Practice recommends that the SENCO is a member of the school leadership team and says that the SENCO should work with the headteacher and governing body to fulfil this role.

The SENCO should work with the headteacher and governing body, trust board or proprietor to establish a clear picture of the resources available to the school, and the strategic approach, including the allocation of funds, to SEN.

Schools must ensure that young people and parents are actively supported so that they contribute to needs assessments, and developing and reviewing EHC plans. The SENCO should ensure that parents and young people are engaged in these planning and decision-making processes.

The SENCO should provide professional guidance to colleagues and work with staff, parents and other agencies.

The SENCO should support class or subject teachers to carry out a clear analysis of the needs of a child who is identified as needing SEN support. They should work with the class or subject teacher to agree the adjustments, interventions and support that will be provided to the pupil. They should advise the class or subject teacher on effective implementation and support, help them to problem-solve and revise support in light of a pupil's progress and development.

The SENCO should be aware of provision in the Local Offer.

Support SENCOs should expect

The Code of Practice says that schools should ensure that the SENCO has sufficient time and resources to carry out their functions. This should include providing the SENCO with sufficient administrative support and time away from teaching to enable them to fulfil their role. The Code of Practice also says that this should be similar to other 'important strategic roles within a school'.

The SENCO should have time within the working day to undertake training and continuing professional development (CPD). SENCOs should have access to specialist training and CPD. This might include access to professional networks for SENCOs and other SEN specialists.

SENCOs that have teaching responsibilities should have sufficient time to plan and prepare lessons for the pupils they teach, including those pupils who have additional or different support needs.

The NASUWT's main concerns

The NASUWT has a number of concerns about the changes.

The reform process

- Evaluations of the SEND pathfinder programme have revealed a number of issues that could undermine effective implementation of the reforms.¹ These include issues related to multi-agency working, workforce development and non-pathfinder areas' readiness to implement the reforms. Feedback to the NASUWT from staff working in some pathfinder areas also indicates that they have concerns about the timescale for implementing the reforms and the extent to which what has been tested can be 'scaled up' effectively.
- The reforms are being introduced over three and half years from September 2014. Whilst this is intended to help schools, colleges, local authorities and other providers introduce the changes, it may increase the complexity of procedures and processes.

The role of the SENCO

- The fact that the SENCO provides professional support to colleagues and co-ordinates SEN support within and beyond the school means that they may be expected to solve problems arising from the reforms. For example, the SENCO may be expected to identify and secure appropriate external provision and support even if the organisations that previously delivered these services no longer exist.
- Some schools may be reluctant to create the role of SENCO as a strategic role. This will limit the SENCO's ability to operate effectively across the school. In particular, they may have little or no influence over decisions.

Funding issues

- Many SENCOs do not have an SEN budget and funding for SEN is not ring-fenced. As a result, SENCOs may be expected to make strategic decisions about SEN provision but may not actually have the power to do this.
- Cuts to local authority budgets and other services that support children and young people with SEN mean that schools may not be able to access appropriate external advice and support. Advice and support that is available may be very expensive.
- Some schools have responded to budget cuts by reducing the number of support staff posts. Many of these posts provided support to pupils with SEND. The loss of these posts is placing significant pressure on the SENCO as well as on class or subject teachers.

1 Department for Education (March 2014) *The SEN and Disability Pathfinder programme Evaluation: Readiness for reform and effectiveness of Pathfinder Champions*, and earlier evaluation reports from June 2013, October 2013 and January 2014.

Training and professional development

- SENCOs newly appointed to the role must gain a National SENCO Award within three years of being appointed to the post. Some schools may be reluctant to fund training or provide the SENCO with time off during the working day to undertake the necessary training.
- The SENCO may not be able to gain the specialist advice and support that they need from within the school. The SENCO may become isolated if they are not encouraged and supported to make links to networks and specialist support outside their school.

Academy chains

- Academy chains should adopt a strategic approach to SEN. This must involve them co-operating with the local authorities where their schools are located. Some academy chains, especially chains that operate across a number of local authority areas, may seek to establish their own approach to meeting the needs of pupils with SEN. SENCOs and school leaders may come under pressure from the academy trust and the local authorities where policies conflict.

Workload

- The Code of Practice makes it clear that the SENCO role should be a strategic one. This means that the SENCO may be expected to liaise with external organisations about strategic decisions across an area, e.g. commissioning, and matters relating to the Local Offer. However, in many schools the SENCO retains a large teaching timetable. There is a danger that SENCOs will come under immense pressure to fulfil these strategic responsibilities and continue to carry out all of their general teaching responsibilities.
- Cuts to budgets and services mean that schools are likely to have to meet a greater range of needs from within the school. This places great demands on class and subject teachers, but it places even greater demands on the SENCO, as they advise and support class and subject teachers.
- Evidence from SEND pathfinders indicates that schools may be expected to take on the role of key worker. SENCOs are likely to come under particular pressure to take on the role. This is likely to increase bureaucracy and the workload of SENCOs.
- Local authorities, academy trusts and other organisations may seek to introduce burdensome and bureaucratic arrangements for managing SEN.
- The SEN information report regulations require schools to publish a wide range of information about their SEN provision. This is likely to be very time-consuming and the SENCO may be expected to take a lead role in preparing and maintaining the SEN information report.

The SEND reforms assume that staff will be trained to support pupils with SEN effectively. The SENCO may come under considerable pressure to deliver training for staff within the school.

NASUWT advice and support

SENCOs must contact the NASUWT for advice if problems arise.

The NASUWT would like to collect evidence about the sorts of problems that teachers, SENCOs and school leaders are encountering. The Union will use this information to identify how it can better support members, including pressing for changes to policies and practice nationally, locally and in schools. SENCOs should e-mail the NASUWT (education@mail.nasuwt.org.uk) with brief information about any issues they feel the Union should be aware of and which need to be addressed.