



# Special Educational Needs and Disability

## Understanding local variation in prevalence, service provision and support

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This NCB Research summary presents the main findings from a study commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and undertaken between March 2008 and August 2009 by NCB Research Centre and the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education. The study explored local variation in prevalence of, and support and provision for, children with special educational needs (SEN)<sup>4</sup>. The research considered hearing impairment and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as exemplar conditions.

## Summary

- The study confirmed widespread variation between local authorities, but found that there were also common trends such as a commitment to working with other agencies.
- There is no simple explanation for the variation found between local authorities. It is likely to be the result of the interaction between a number of factors, making it difficult to disentangle cause and effect.
- Some variation is inevitable – and not necessarily undesirable – when local authorities are responding to local needs and circumstances. Local variation is clearly undesirable, however, if it reflects unmet need and inequities in access to, and level of, services.
- Factors supporting best practice include a strong ethos of inclusion; strong and effective multi-agency working; staff commitment and strong leadership; effective partnerships with stakeholders; and an adequate number of skilled staff at all levels.

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<sup>4</sup> A child or young person is deemed to have special educational needs if he or she 'has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for him [or her]'. OPSI (1996). Education Act. Part IV, Ch.I. London: OPSI.

# Background

There is a growing recognition of the variation between local authorities in the prevalence of children with SEN and the nature and quality of services provided to support them. Local area data on children with SEN show differences in the number of children with SEN, the rates of children with specific impairments and the Code of Practice level of support they are receiving (School Action, School Action Plus or a Statement of SEN).

The aim of this study was to explore the current variation in prevalence and provision in order to better understand the nature and extent of differences between local authorities, what might lie behind these differences, and what could be done to support more equitable access to services and support for children and their families.

## Key findings

### Variation in prevalence

The average number of pupils assessed as having SEN in England in 2008 was just under one in five (19.4 per cent), ranging from 7.9 to 28.8 per cent across local authorities. Our analysis suggests that the overall level of SEN in an area is related to levels of disability, and that areas with higher levels of deprivation (but not disability) had higher levels of SEN. There was also more variation for both ASD and hearing impairment than for SEN overall.

In explaining both high and low prevalence of SEN, interviewees raised issues of identification, perverse incentives and characteristics of the local SEN population. For ASD and hearing impairment, perceived explanations for variation in prevalence included issues with School Census data, identification and diagnosis, the characteristics of the population, and provision available.

### Variation in the use of statements

Our analysis suggested considerable variation in how statements of SEN were used. The proportion of pupils with statements was much lower where there were more pupils with SEN overall, suggesting a lower threshold for SEN was being used in these areas. Local authorities with lower rates of statementing made more use of non-mainstream schools, suggesting that statements in these areas may be 'reserved' for children with severe and complex needs.

The policy in many areas was to provide support in mainstream schools without the need for a

statement, and to use statements almost exclusively for children with severe and complex needs. Variation in the use of statements was associated with differences in the funding structure of mainstream schools, and in the confidence that schools and parents had in the adequacy of the local authority's support for a child without a statement.

### Variation in attainment and spending levels

Seven in ten of all pupils across Key Stages 2–4 performed at the expected level. However, nationally among pupils with SEN, little more than one third were achieving at the level appropriate for their age. In authorities where there was a small gap in attainment, this was said to be linked to a number of factors such as a focus on early intervention, good quality provision and a priority on attainment for all pupils.

We found that where there were more pupils with SEN, the amount spent on each child decreased. This may reflect limited resources, or it may reflect different thresholds for SEN assessment, so that in areas with lower thresholds the average level of need within the SEN population is lower, and so less spending is required. However, there was no clear link between spending levels and the quality of SEN provision.

### Variation in multi-agency working

An integrated, multi-agency approach plays an important role in the provision of services that most effectively support children with SEN. Although there was a commitment to this approach across all case study authorities, there was considerable variation in how embedded it was in planning and practice.

Key factors which appeared to facilitate strategic multi-agency working were:

- strong leadership and senior management commitment
- well-embedded Children's Trust arrangements
- strategically linked systems and processes
- established information-sharing protocols
- some joint commissioning and/or pooled budgets
- the involvement of all stakeholders.

Well-embedded multi-agency strategic practice was generally characterised by clear and integrated systems, processes and strategies, facilitated through multi-agency groups. Good operational multi-agency practice was facilitated by adequate resourcing, good communication systems, and joint training and team building.

## Variation in identification and assessment of children with SEN

There was significant variation in identification, assessment and referral practice for children with SEN between and within the case study local authorities, and few appeared strong across all age groups and conditions. Good practice appeared to be influenced by communication and information-sharing between agencies, especially with health. It was also influenced by a number of practices to increase early identification, particularly the training of frontline staff, and having sufficient staff capacity to meet demand. In authorities with apparently good identification systems, there was more likelihood of integrated services and good communication between education and their partner agencies; a specific focus on developing practitioner skills and raising awareness through training; and opportunities for practitioners to raise concerns with specialists and support staff. Multi-agency assessments and good data sharing were more likely to occur in authorities where there was greater integration of services and multi-agency working, and where the Common Assessment Framework and Early Support Programme were well established.

## Variation in provision and support

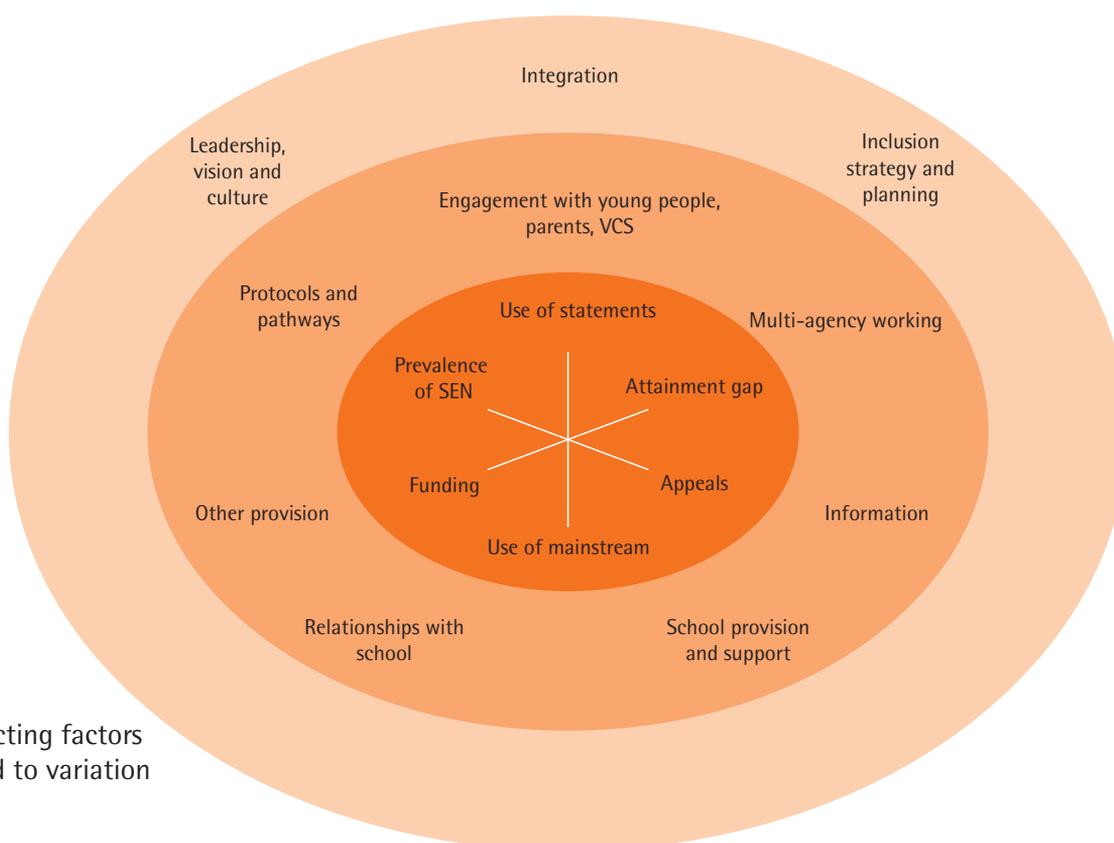
Different patterns of school provision were found across the case studies. Not all local authorities had specialist provision for pre-school children, and there were differences in the extent of specialist settings for children with hearing impairment and those

with ASD. All the case study local authorities said that they were looking at reducing and reorganising school provision to build a spectrum encompassing special schools, specialist mainstream provision and mainstream schools, with the focus generally shifting away from special schools. Leadership, consultation and partnership were seen as key to making change in this area successful.

There were different approaches to providing specialist support to mainstream schools, notably a focus on the needs of individual child versus a whole-school approach to inclusion. There were also different approaches to monitoring the progress of children with SEN: whether the focus was on attainment or on inclusion, and whether monitoring was led by schools or the local authority.

## The interacting factors related to variation

The study revealed the complexity of trying to account for variation between local authorities. A multitude of factors were implicated, many of which interact with each other, as illustrated in the diagram below. Indicators in the inner circle are linked and influenced by policies, practices and the level of provision, which in turn are affected by overarching factors within a local authority such as leadership, integration and inclusion strategies.



Interacting factors related to variation

## Policy implications

This study confirmed that there is widespread variation between local authorities, but alongside differences in practice and provision for children with SEN, were common trends such as a commitment to working with other agencies. Understanding the reasons for the differences that exist proved a challenging task. The overall finding is that there is no simple explanation for the variation and that it is likely to be the product of a number of interacting factors, such as leadership and quality of the workforce; range of educational provision; spending levels, policies and planning; multi-agency working; access to support; and working in partnership with parents.

The study also suggests that some types of variation are inevitable and not necessarily undesirable. Local authorities approach their population of schoolchildren in different ways. Differing proportions of children with statements or in different kinds of specialist or mainstream provision may reflect not differences in the quality of services available to children with SEN and their families, but the responsiveness of local authorities to local needs and circumstances. What is likely to be more important is that underlying principles are adhered to – for example, that services are developed in partnership with parents and children, that policies are transparent and that information is easily accessible to families. Within this, there could, and indeed should, be scope for local variation. Whilst local variation may sometimes be negatively characterised as a postcode lottery, it may equally be more positively described as responding to local circumstances taking into account the views of children, young people and their families.

However, local variation is clearly undesirable when it reflects unmet need and inequities in access to, and level of, services. This research suggests that there is a need to consider how support, training and advice is provided for mainstream teachers, as well as ensuring high quality standards for SEN specialist services and considering how this affects the outcomes for disabled children and those with SEN.

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## Methodology

The study took a multi-method approach: a literature review; analysis of published data on SEN prevalence and practice; case studies in 16 local authorities, involving in-depth interviews with strategic leads, Parent Partnership Service coordinators, and voluntary and community sector representatives (84 interviews in total, involving 96 individuals); and interviews with SEN leads in 21 schools. This approach allowed for an exploration of what might lie behind the variation indicated by the statistics, as well as enabling us to explore the components of good practice identified in the literature review.

The case study local authorities were selected to exemplify differences in the quality of approaches and of support for children with SEN, as well as variation in prevalence and classification, so that we could then explore reasons for these differences. The final 16 included those that were high and low on prevalence of children with SEN, with hearing impairment or ASD; and high or low in the proportion of children with SEN who had a statement.

## References

The full report and other outputs are available on the DCSF website.

Lewis and others (2010) *Special Educational Needs and Disability: Understanding Local Variation in Prevalence, Service Provision and Support*. DCSF-RR211.

<http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/default.aspx?PageFunction=productdetails&PageMode=publications&ProductId=DCSF-RR211&>

Mooney and others (2010) *Special Educational Needs and Disability: Understanding Local Variation in Prevalence, Service Provision and Support – extended summary*. DCSF-RB211 ES.

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