



## INFORMATION SHEET

# CHOOSING A SCHOOL

Here are some general guidelines. Clearly they cannot cover everything, but they do aim to provide a useful starter.

### What kind of school does my child need?

The golden rule is to be sure that you are fully aware of not only your child's range of special educational needs but also their extent and severity. They all affect his or her ability to cope with the full national curriculum. Before you make your case to the local authority stating what school you want your child to attend, you *must* fully understand his or her needs.

Bear in mind, too, that in the course of a statutory assessment or during the process of challenging an inadequate statement you will probably learn a lot more about your child than you initially suspected. As a consequence, your preliminary ideas about what kind of school might be most suitable may well change.

### How many schools should I visit?

If you have a clear picture of your child's needs you will probably not need to visit very many. Indeed, avoid seeing a lot – as most will not be appropriate anyway.

### Are there any publications that will help me choose a school?

Two very useful books provide information on both maintained and independent special schools, as well as mainstream schools that provide some specialist support for certain special needs:

#### **Schools for Special Needs**

Gabbitas Education (Kogan, 2011)

A comprehensive guide to special needs education in the UK.

#### **Choosing a School for a Child with Special Needs**

Ruth Birnbaum (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009)

Very detailed and helpful guidance on choosing a school.

The *Good Schools Guide: Special Educational Needs* was a useful source of information but has not been published in book form since 2008. However, much of its content is now updated and available online at:

<http://www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk/help-and-advice/special-needs-advice>

Lists of schools are also available from national support groups such as the National Autistic Society and the Dyslexia Association.

## **What main points should I take into account when considering schools and what level of provision is my child entitled to?**

Clearly, you need first to know the full range of your child's needs and the type of provision that will be required to address them. *Your child is entitled to provision that is appropriate and adequate to meet his or her needs.* That does not mean that he or she will automatically get it from the local authority, since what the authority considers adequate and appropriate may not be what your evidence suggests is needed!

Remember also that whilst you may wish your child to receive a placement that can provide a very high level of teaching, support and therapy, this may not be educationally or financially justified – it may be regarded as “Rolls Royce” rather than adequate provision.

***Children with statements of special educational needs may receive their education in a range of placements. The main ones are:***

- Mainstream schools
- Special schools
- Specialist schools

## **MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS**

Most children with special educational needs are in fact educated in mainstream schools. Many make some provision for children with SEN whether in the form of extra support, a general SEN resource centre, a unit specializing in a particular need, or some enhanced provision that may include access to speech and language therapy or specialist teaching. However, it is generally expected that the children will spend at least part of their time in mainstream class.

## **Can I insist that my child is educated in mainstream?**

Many parents are anxious that their children are educated in mainstream schools, and their parental right to this is clearly set out in Section 316 of the 1996 Education Act and in the Code of Practice in Chapter 8. It is important to note, however, that if the presence of the child will adversely affect the education of other pupils then a place *may* be refused. Even then, it is important to remember that a school cannot refuse if the Part 3 provision to be made for the child will be appropriate.

If a child is to be educated in mainstream, it is important that any provision required to assure adequacy of progress should be set out specifically, in detail and quantified in Part 3 of the statement. If it is not, then the risk of inadequate progress is significant. Whether the provision is to include placement in a unit or resource centre or not, it is important that parents ensure that all the provision needed – specialist teaching, trained and experienced support, appropriate therapies – is included in the statement. For academies, it would be wise to check most carefully the provision they may have on

site, including the background and status of the SENCOs, as well as the time they are allocated for their work.

### **Can my child's statement name an independent mainstream school?**

It can, but it is rare that a local authority will agree to name one. It may choose to do so where it is felt that factors like small classroom size or some specialism at the school makes such a placement appropriate. You may, however, choose to place your child in an independent mainstream school at your own expense, and ask the authority to provide under Part 3 the level of support or therapies needed in that provision – although the enthusiasm of the authorities to do so is very limited! The battle may be significant! Local authorities do not have to provide Part 3 support at all if the child isn't at the school named in the statement, whether they are in an independent school or being home educated. The authorities are entitled to argue that they have set up the provision at the school that is named in the statement, or that it is cheaper to provide it there. In such cases, the best hope is to persuade the authority that making provision at the independent school is a cheaper option for them.

## **SPECIAL SCHOOLS**

Special schools tend to be maintained, local and usually accepting of a range of special needs. Frequently they are for children with moderate, severe or profound and multiple learning difficulties (MLD, SLD or PMLD) but who may also have other needs such as autism. Some are designated under the very broad description of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). Special schools are usually funded for a set number of pupils whether the school is full or not.

There are undoubtedly some good schools of this kind, but the very general nature of their intake and the fact that they are subject to the funding provisions of the local authorities as well as the availability of therapy provision from the Primary Care Trusts does bring into doubt the suitability of such schools for pupils with very specific needs or with highly complex needs. It is our view that parents should be very careful before agreeing to a placement in them unless they are sure that the schools can actually meet their child's needs.

### **What should I consider when choosing a special school?**

There is a danger that children placed in a special school may not get the specialist provision they require because their main need is seen as, for example, MLD when really it is another, more specific need that should be addressed. And in a BESD school, a child may be seen as one with behavioural difficulties rather than one whose behavioural presentation stems from, for example, disordered speech and language, impairments related to autism, or ADHD.

Since special schools are often funded for a fixed number of pupils, it is very much in the financial interests of the local authority to keep them full. The suitability of the placement may therefore be of less importance. Furthermore, providing finance for one extra place may well be less expensive than funding a place in a specialist school that would be more appropriate.

Because mainstream special schools are funded by local authorities, provision of therapies tends to be limited to what the NHS can provide. In other words, therapists rarely work full-time on site and are therefore unable to integrate therapy into the classroom. It's more likely that there will be "bolt-on" provision, with a therapist coming in for a set period of time each week. And there may be periods where no therapist is available at all, or where there are frequent changes of therapist. In many such schools, direct therapy with the child is not available (unless firmly in the child's statement) and an inadequate substitute is provided in the form of therapy input from a therapist who comes into school to advise the teaching and support staff on programmes aimed to meet the child's needs.

Very often special schools accept children on the evidence provided by very inadequate statements of SEN and without first carrying out a full assessment of the children's needs. Even if you present them with additional information that suggests the school may not be appropriate for your child, they still tend to continue to claim they can meet their needs. Pressure on the school by the local authority in such cases can be very strong! It is a good idea to ask the school to carry out a full assessment anyway and to provide your own assessment form (a template is available from SOS!SEN).

If you decide that a special school is appropriate for your child, it is important to ensure that Part 3 of his or her statement is specific, detailed and quantified so that any lapse in the provision of therapies and specialist teaching may be addressed speedily – if necessary by seeking judicial review of the local authority.

## **SPECIALIST SCHOOLS**

As their name indicates, specialist schools are important because they provide a high level of specialist teaching and therapy, often in one or a particular group of special needs. They are usually independent schools, they are far less generalist than special schools, and their admissions profiles are more precise in respect of the ability levels required for entry and the levels of severity they target. Whilst most focus on a particular primary need, they may also be able to provide for additional needs often associated with it: for example, a specialist school for children of at least average ability with speech and language difficulties may well be able to meet the needs of a child who also has high-functioning autism and sensory processing difficulties – although speech and language will be firmly the dominant need. Equally, schools specializing in moderate to severe dyslexia may well be able to meet such commonly related needs as dyspraxia and speech and language difficulties. Schools for the hearing or visually impaired are likely to have clear admissions profiles relating to ability levels, and some may be able to meet other needs such as dyslexia and dyspraxia.

Many specialist schools offer waking day/residential care as well as day placements. And many have therapies fully integrated into the school day, with therapists employed as full members of the school staff. Many are located in country areas and in large houses with extensive grounds. Needless to say, the very high level of specialist provision means that many have correspondingly high fees.

## **What should I consider when choosing a specialist school?**

First of all you need to consider suitability and whether your child's needs are significant enough to need such a placement. You also need to look carefully at the school's prospectus and check that it can provide all it says it can. Lovely grounds and former stately homes do not necessarily ensure the right provision. What actually happens in the classroom and during informal times is what really matters. It is as important when considering such places to check on staff turnover and qualifications, and on adequacy of therapy provision, as it would be for a generic special school or a resource base in a mainstream school. Generally, however, specialist schools do provide in the classroom a high level of integrated teaching and therapy.

### **I think I have found the right school for my child but the local authority has a different view. I believe there is no other school in our area that can meet my child's needs. Can I insist on my choice?**

If there is no suitable school in the area, your child may be placed in a school outside your local authority boundary, even to the point of placement in a school offering boarding accommodation. However, because specialist schools tend to charge relatively high fees and transport to and from them can be expensive, it is no surprise that most authorities resist agreeing to such placements, arguing that they are not an efficient use of public finance. You cannot insist on such a placement, but you do have the option of an appeal to the SEN Tribunal in order to try to justify it.

## **OTHER FACTORS**

### **What if my child needs a waking day curriculum?**

Some children require a school where they can follow what is called a waking day curriculum. This means that their education does not stop at the end of the formal school day but continues so that skills learned in class or in therapy sessions can be practised and reinforced during informal times (such as meals, clubs, general interaction with peers, etc.) with the support of care staff working closely with the teachers and therapists who are aware of how best to carry out that support. A waking day curriculum placement is an *educational provision*.

**Warning:** We note that the SEN Tribunal is becoming increasingly reluctant to order waking day placements unless they are cheaper (for example, because of the saving on travel) or they are really convinced that they are needed for educational purposes.

### **What if my child needs a residential placement?**

Children may be placed in a residential special school – although this will not necessarily be for primarily educational reasons. Placement is often because family circumstances necessitate such a school, in which case the route to the school is often determined as the result of Core Assessments undertaken by social workers within Children's Services. In fact, many specialist schools meet both waking day and residential needs.

### **What if the school I want is full?**

If the local authority refuses your child a place in a maintained special school or in a unit/resource centre in a maintained mainstream school because it is full, you do have the option of continuing to fight for a place by formally requesting that the authority provide an additional place. If they still refuse, you can appeal to the SEN Tribunal. Your success in such a case will largely hinge on whether it is not unreasonable for an additional place to be ordered.

If the school is an independent one and it is full, you have no right of appeal.

## HELPFUL HINTS

- **Whatever type of school you are considering, try to make sure that a detailed assessment of your child is undertaken and fully reported to you.** This has been mentioned above in relation to special schools but it is also important that specialist schools provide you with detail of how they assessed your child, who carried out the assessment, and how they justify their decision. This provides you with excellent evidence to argue your case for the right school. A letter from the school offering your child a place but saying little more than “he came, he spent the day, we’ll have him” is insufficient and you should try to insist on a full assessment and report.
- **Check on staff qualifications, appropriate and successful experience, staff turnover, exam results, etc. – as this will give you a good guide to the stability and suitability of the school.** Watch out for assurances that the specialist teacher is available. So often that teacher turns out not to have specialist qualifications in the needs of your child. For maintained schools you can obtain this information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. Independent schools are not obliged to provide such information but you can still press for it; if you don’t get the answers, then the suitability of the school may be in question.
- Sometimes it is very hard for parents to accept that the kind of school their child needs is one for children whose needs they thought were too severe. **It is, however, vitally important to get the right school – because the wrong one will not help your child one bit.** The advice of educational psychologists and other professionals is all-important and should be heeded, so long as the assessments they make are detailed and specific in terms of the provision needed.