



SEND Networks: SEND Strategic Leads (Project 8)

SEND Operational Leads (Project 9)

SEND Forum (Project 12)

2025/26 Evaluation Report and Proposal for 26/27 (Draft)

1. Context

The **SEND Strategic Leads and Operational Leads** networks have existed for several years and were originally intended as sector-led network support for those with strategic SEND leadership and managers of EHCP statutory assessment and review teams. In recent years the networks have evolved to provide information, support, best practice and oversight, regional practice guides, MOUs and oversight of a number SEND projects.

The **SEND forum** is a more recent offer, dating back three years. It welcomes a wider cohort with the intention of sharing information and innovative practice to professionals (LA & NHS), parents/carers, young people, charities, independent organisations and education settings.

In the 2025/26 financial year the networks have been a means through which SEND leaders and those with wider involvement in SEND (SEND Forum) have been supported to navigate the changing landscape in multiple areas linked to government reforms specifically: SEND, education, social care, local government and NHS reforms. Colleagues in SEND have also faced unprecedented growth in demand for services and support alongside escalating financial challenges.

The work undertaken in 25/26 continues to be sector led but in the context of the requirements of the DfE RIIA SEND grant. The work undertaken consequently sits within the DfE SEND Priorities and DfE SEND Enablers (appended).

2. Activities, outcomes and learning: 2025-26

2a. SEND Strategic Leads and SEND Operational Leads

(i) Summary of activity

The two networks have increasingly held joint meetings/events in 25/26 as roles and content frequently overlap. Each network is chaired by leaders from the region as below:

Strategic Leads: Deborah Smit (Oxfordshire) & Jamie Conran (Wokingham)

Operational Leads: David Griffiths (Windsor and Maidenhead)

Chairs meet with the regional SEND Lead (SESLIP) and network facilitator (SESLIP) to plan agendas in advance and consider feedback from previous meetings.



Two joint whole day events were held in London 27/6/25 and 19/11. On both occasions meetings were arranged to coincide with Education Leads so that colleagues were able to join for agreed agenda items. In addition, invitations for these events are extended to a wider group including parent/carer representatives, DfE, NHSE and Whole School SEND. Colleagues from other regional areas have also been invited to share innovative practice and join discussions.

Feedback from both events was extremely positive and there is clear desire to continue to provide opportunities for in person meetings alongside shorter virtual network meetings.

Attendance at both events was high with all LAs responding to the invitation. For example, sixteen of the nineteen LAs attended the 19/11 event with many sending more than one attendee. The three who did not attend had confirmed a place but were prevented from attending on the day by illness or unanticipated local demands.

In addition, 3 virtual meetings have been held for Strategic Leads, 2 virtual meetings for Operational Leads and one joint meeting. The aim is to meet at least termly and (where possible) half termly either as individual or joint groups.

(ii) Reflections and learning

The outcomes set out in the SESLIP Regional Improvement Plan 2025-26, including RIIA Grant Delivery Plan 2025-26 have been met.

Feedback from in person events highlights the value colleagues place on opportunities to meet and work together. There is a clearly expressed desire to ensure that there is a mix of in person and virtual meetings. This is despite the challenges shared by some LAs around budget restrictions for travel linked to the current challenging financial environment. Half termly meetings are supported but this could be reduced if whole day in person meetings were arranged.

Feedback highlighted the value staff placed on opportunities for networking – both formal and informal. In an area of work challenged by staffing shortages and continuing demand, the time to think with others was valued and reinforced a sense of being valued (informal feedback).

Whilst the range of speakers at whole day events was appreciated, a mix of inspirational input, information and plentiful opportunity to share thinking and experience was considered ideal. Topics covered were highly rated as appropriate and useful to the group.

Wider colleagues appreciated opportunities to share practice and information but also valued networking opportunities to better understand LA colleagues issues and share perspectives.

The whole day events also provided opportunity to promote engagement and clarify expectations around SEND RIIA projects. This supported cohesion and allowed feedback to inform the development of SEND projects. Presentations were provided by:

NNPCF – co-production project

Chris Baird and Claire Woodcock – Courageous Conversations and Targeted support activity

Public Alchemy – SEND data



Marian Cullen and Emma Stone – Mainstream Inclusion

Nick King – SEND funding

Jo McSherrie – SEND apprenticeship

Sheelagh Sullivan – SEND legal training

Julie Pointer – PfA and the CYP regional network.

The link with educational leads encouraged joint thinking around the impact of national SEND initiatives (Change Programme) and reform expectations supported by presentations from DfE colleagues.

Whole day events have inspired thinking around new or existing projects. For example, the SEND induction programme grew from thinking and request from regional colleagues at a whole day event and has been developed in this context.

Whilst whole day events proved best for networking and strategic thinking, virtual meetings remain valued as a way of sharing and clarifying issues, challenges and expectations. Meetings are structured to ensure opportunities for discussion and colleagues have reflected that external presentations should be minimised to allow for this. Comments from those new to post indicate that the network meetings provide learning and reassurance. Virtual meetings are closed to wider attendees unless requested for agenda items. The emphasis is on professional learning, support and discussion in a safe, non-judgemental environment.

These meetings have also proved a valuable means of sharing inspection experiences, improvement plans and, in the current context, SEND reform planning progress. Colleagues have been generous in sharing information and materials at and between meetings.

For further information regarding the meetings that have taken place and resources please [click here](#) or contact Sheelagh Sullivan on sheelagh.sullivan@outlook.com

Recommendations

It is recommended that both network groups continue but that the overlap between Strategic Leads and Operational Leads continues to be explored, including other formats that may help to cater for the joint and separate requirements of each group.

It is recommended that groups meet in person twice a year on a joint basis and continue to coincide dates (if possible) with Education Leads. Agendas that provide an element of choice (seminar approach) may help to provide for the needs of both groups.

Further virtual meetings should be held on at least a termly basis. The groups should be offered separate meetings on at least two occasions each year.

It is recommended that both groups benefit from data input from regional data colleagues on a regular basis. SESLIP colleagues should liaise to support this.

It is recommended that whole day in person meetings continue to be partially used to support wider SEND (SESLIP) projects – encouraging clarity and participation.

It is recommended that in person whole day meetings continue to representatives from a wider professional group including DfE, NHS, NNPCF and WSS.



2b. SEND Forum

(i) Summary of activity

SEND forums are held at least termly and may be half termly if required. Frequency is dictated by the need to provide information and the availability of speakers but half-termly dates are published for the academic year in advance. Meetings are open to all with an interest in SEND and there is no requirement to book. The forum grew from a perceived gap in opportunities to hear collectively as a region from key organisations around SEND including Ofsted, DfE, NHSE, RISE, NDTi, NNPCF, SESLIP and other wider organisations and providers.

A circulation list is kept (currently around 350) and names are added on request. Recordings of forum are made and are provided to individuals from the circulation list on request. The forum is timed over lunch (usually 12-1.30 pm) so that colleagues can 'munch and listen'. The emphasis is on providing information and sharing regional practice from a wide variety of sources. Presentations are relatively short with limited opportunities for discussion. All information is shared, with contact details, after the meeting.

SEND forum is jointly chaired by NHSE SEND Adviser (Adeline Gibbs) and SESLIP (Sheelagh Sullivan).

In the 25-26 financial year forums took place on 7/5/25, 2/7/25, 8/10/25 and 4/2/26. The second spring term forum was cancelled due to pressures on colleagues following SEND reform announcements and additional regional meetings organised by DfE. The next forum will be on 6/5/26. However, the July summer term forum was extended due to demand.

The following groups and organisations have presented at forum in the financial year 25-26: NHSE, PANDAS UK, West Sussex PCF, CDC, Bevan Brittan Legal, Ofsted, NDTi, Portsmouth City Council, Kent County Council, DfE regional, DfE national (Christine Lenehan), Thrive, Surrey County Council, Southampton City Council, SESLIP, and Dingley's Promise

Numbers at forum are variable but have ranged from 46-80 participants. Those joining represent several organisations including LAs (range of services), NHS, Schools and Colleges, regional PCF members, DfE, RISE partners and other SEND groups.

For further information regarding the forums which have taken place and resources shared at these forums please [click here](#) or contact Sheelagh Sullivan on sheelagh.sullivan@outlook.com or Sonia Dayal on sonia.dayal@sdsa.net

(ii) Reflections and recommendations

Attendance at forum is significantly impacted by the range and nature of speakers. It has not always been easy to strike a good balance between regional input and sharing of innovative practice and the need to share key information around SEND practice and reform. However, attendance has grown significantly from relatively small numbers in the early meetings, and it is rare to have less than 50 participants. There is notable range in attendees. NHS colleagues are well represented and LA participants a mix of operational and managerial staff. There is a lack of representation from social care colleagues, and this may be due to awareness of staff in these posts or that the agenda does not reflect practice and/or interest.



It is recommended that this is an area of focus in the coming year to encourage input and participation from this group of staff.

Whilst setting staff do attend, the SEND reform agenda may support greater input and representation from this area in the year ahead. The sharing of LA practice around 'experts at hand' and LAs as 'conveners' to support improving practice around SEND delivery in settings is a likely area of focus.

It is recommended that the Inclusion Community of Practice is approached to support with this. Links with Whole School SEND should be strengthened to explore the barriers to, and potential for, greater setting involvement.

We know that forum reaches wider than attendees through the circulation of presentations. This increases the impact and potential for learning to support improvement.

It is recommended that the impact and reach of forum presentations is surveyed in the year ahead. The possibility of recording and circulating forum presentations (not just on request) should be explored.

In general, the emphasis on delivery rather than discussion has been favoured by forum attendees but we have also had requests to facilitate discussion.

In the year ahead, it's recommended that ways of doing this are explored that preserve the 'listen in and learn' aspect of forum.

Proposals for 26-27

It is proposed that the RIIA continue to support all 3 networks based on the recommendations made in the report.

Ways of agreeing and ensuring impact will be identified in collaboration with the network groups and, for the SEND forum, through survey.

For further information or to follow up any of the proposals and recommendations please contact Sheelagh Sullivan on sheelagh.sullivan@outlook.com or Sonia Dayal on sonia.dayal@sdsa.net

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