



Why SEND Delays Are Hurting Children — And Costing More Money

A plain-English summary for SEND families of

The Governance-Friction Cost Model in England’s SEND System

Prepared by Every Child Matters, a project of ND SEND Consultants CIC

Summary

For years, parents have been told that the SEND crisis is happening because:

- too many children need help
- schools cannot cope
- there is not enough money
- there are not enough Educational Psychologists
- local authorities are overwhelmed

This investigation found something much more worrying.

The evidence suggests that the SEND system is becoming more expensive partly because children are waiting too long for help.

And while they wait:

- children become more unwell
- school placements break down
- mental health deteriorates
- families reach crisis point
- support becomes far more expensive later

The investigation examined:

- local authority data
- EHCP delays
- SEND spending
- transport spending
- tribunal and governance evidence
- Educational Psychology QA systems



- over 1,200 family testimonies

The strongest finding was this:

The longer support is delayed, the higher the downstream cost becomes.

What the investigation found

Across England, many children are waiting too long for:

- assessments
- therapies
- specialist placements
- transport
- implementation of EHCP provision
- alternative provision
- decisions already supported by evidence

The investigation found that delays are strongly linked to:

- school breakdown
- anxiety and mental health deterioration
- exclusion risk
- children being out of school
- family crisis
- tribunal escalation
- expensive emergency intervention later

The strongest statistical relationship found in the investigation was between:

- EHCP delay
and
- higher SEND expenditure later.

What is “governance-friction”?

The report uses the phrase “governance-friction” to describe systems that slow things down before support is finally put in place.

Parents often describe this as:



- endless panels
- repeated reviews
- being asked for the same evidence again
- delayed sign-off
- “re-consulting”
- waiting for another meeting
- reports being sent back
- decisions being delayed without clear explanation
- support agreed “in principle” but not implemented

The investigation found evidence of these systems across England.

The report does NOT say every local authority behaves the same way.

But it does conclude that these systems appear at national scale and are associated with delay and rising costs.

The cycle families described

The investigation identified the same pattern again and again.

Delay

Children wait for support.

↓

Needs escalate

Children become:

- anxious
- dysregulated
- exhausted
- unable to attend school
- mentally unwell
- isolated

↓

Placements break down

Families describe:

- exclusions



- EBSA
- children out of school
- repeated failed placements
- emergency provision
- crisis involvement

↓

Costs increase

Later, local authorities may then pay for:

- specialist transport
- independent schools
- alternative provision
- tribunals
- crisis mental health intervention
- emergency placements

↓

More pressure enters the system

Which then leads to:

- tighter gatekeeping
- more review layers
- more delay

And the cycle repeats.

What families said

The investigation reviewed over 1,200 testimony records from families across England.

Parents repeatedly described:

- long delays
- cancelled reviews
- delayed implementation
- tribunal escalation
- worsening mental health
- provision instability
- repeated procedural barriers



Examples included:

“These delays have caused our child to be out of education for a year now.”

“It took the LA a year to implement AP.”

“My child became significantly unwell, under the crisis team and we had to consider residential care due to a lack of support.”

“They then delayed engagement so then I'd end up losing the supplier.”

“Repeated procedural delays that escalated a manageable issue into a legal dispute.”

Many parents described feeling:

- exhausted
- disbelieved
- trapped in endless process
- forced into tribunal
- unable to secure support already evidenced by professionals

Educational Psychology concerns

The investigation also found evidence that Educational Psychology advice is sometimes subject to:

- QA review
- amendment systems
- template controls
- repeat review pathways
- report return processes

The report does NOT claim all QA systems are wrong.

But it does raise concerns that these systems can delay statutory progression and implementation.

Transport costs are much bigger than many people realise

The investigation found that SEND transport costs are often far higher than older accounting systems suggested.



This matters because delayed placement and unsuitable placement often mean:

- children travel further
- placements fail
- emergency placements increase
- transport becomes more expensive

The investigation found examples where transport costs exceeded:

- £6,000 per child
- and in some cases over £10,000 per child

What this report does NOT claim

The report does NOT claim:

- every delay is deliberate
- every council acts unlawfully in every case
- every professional is responsible
- every governance system is improper
- that statistics alone prove intent

The report DOES conclude:

- delayed support is strongly associated with higher downstream cost
- repeated review systems operate at substantial scale
- governance-friction remained linked to higher escalation costs even after controls
- delaying support does not appear to save money long term

The central conclusion

The investigation suggests that England's SEND crisis is not simply a problem of "too many children needing support".

Instead, the evidence suggests the system may be becoming more expensive because support is too often delayed.

The report's central finding is:



Delaying statutory support appears strongly associated with higher downstream financial and human cost.

And:

Reforms that increase review layers, delay or gatekeeping may risk making both outcomes and costs worse rather than better.

Key findings at a glance

Finding	Result
Strongest relationship identified	$r = 0.818$
Observed minimum escalation-linked exposure	£2.44bn
Authorities in finance-safe dataset	149
Families/testimonies reviewed	1,253
Authorities with explicit EP governance-control evidence	55

Final message to families

This report does not argue that children should receive support without assessment or planning.

It argues something much simpler:

Children who need help earlier often become far more expensive — and far more unwell — when they are left waiting.

And:

Delay itself may now be one of the biggest drivers of both human harm and financial instability inside England’s SEND system.