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Making a Difference

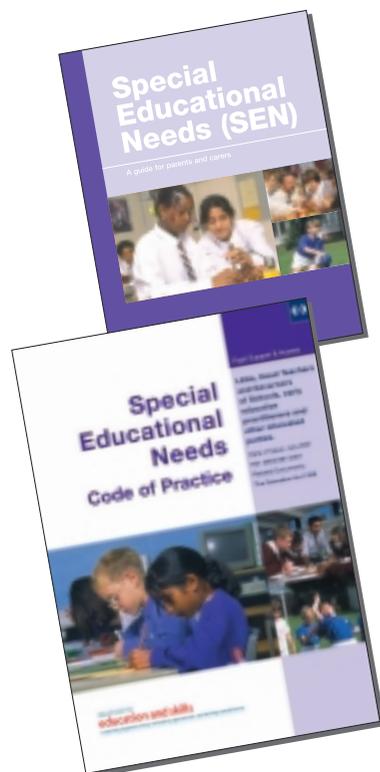
A Guide for Special Educational Needs (SEN) Governors



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Essentials – quick start

1. Get a copy of the *Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice* and accompanying *Guide for Parents and Carers* (free from DfES Publications Centre 0845 602 2260).
2. Read 1:3 of the SEN Code (which defines SEN) and 1:21 (which sets out the governing body's responsibilities).
3. Watch the *Making a Difference* video.
4. Read through this booklet and identify the areas that interest you.



A vital role

As a special educational needs (SEN) governor, you can make an important contribution to the school and the support it provides for pupils with SEN. This booklet, together with the accompanying video, helps you to understand what SEN governors do and gives some useful information.

The governing body, of which you are a member, has statutory responsibilities for pupils with SEN. Put simply, the governing body must do its best to ensure that the school makes the necessary provision for every pupil with SEN. Your role is to make sure that the governing body, and the school staff, keep in mind the needs of these pupils. Whether you are considering the budget, personnel, policies or curriculum, make sure SEN issues are on the agenda.

Further on in this booklet, you will find a checklist of actions an SEN governor could take and suggestions of ways you can help your school (p10).

It's important to be aware that every school is different – the needs of pupils vary from school to school, as does the range of SEN, the relationships you build and the amount of involvement you have at governing body meetings. The amount of time you can devote to the role will also vary. Don't expect to make a big difference straight away. Gathering knowledge and building relationships are the first priorities, and both take time.

Focusing on needs

Although the role of SEN governor varies, one feature remains constant – being an SEN governor is about doing your best to make sure pupils with SEN get the help they need to access the curriculum, and to participate fully in the life of the school. This is what makes it so worthwhile.

Experienced SEN governors say that the more they put into the role, the more they get out of it. You don't need formal qualifications or specialist knowledge to be an SEN governor, but the better informed you are, the more you can help your school.

The important thing to remember is that you are part of a team, which consists of everyone who has responsibility for the pupils with SEN in your school. This includes other governors, the head teacher and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) – in fact, the whole school staff.

Essentials – responsibility

As the SEN governor you are NOT personally liable for the school's provision for pupils with SEN. Rather, the governing body is corporately responsible, under section 317 of the Education Act 1996, to do its best to ensure that necessary provision is made for pupils with SEN.

See 1:21 of the SEN Code for the legal responsibilities of governing bodies for pupils with SEN.

Making A Difference – how to use the pack

This pack is to help you understand your role.

The video:

- introduces the key roles of people involved in SEN provision
- gives a taster of what it is like to be an SEN governor
- outlines what is expected of SEN governors.

The booklet:

- can be used as a quick reference to your responsibilities and who's who in SEN
- suggests things you can read and do to become better informed and make a difference to the pupils at your school
- helps you find your way around the *SEN Code of Practice*
- gives practical tips, drawn from the experience of SEN governors
- points the way to other sources of information.

The Special Educational Needs Code of Practice

The *SEN Code of Practice* gives guidance about providing for pupils with SEN. All maintained schools, early education settings who receive government funding, local education authorities (LEAs), health trusts, social services departments and the SEN and Disability Tribunal must, by law, have regard to the SEN Code. If any of these bodies depart from the SEN Code in any way, they must have a very good reason for doing so and be able to show that they acted in the best interests of the pupil.

Some parts of the SEN Code state the law – everything in purple boxes, and where the word **must** appears in bold. Annex A, at the back of the SEN Code, sets out the legal regulations that apply to SEN.

The SEN Code may look like a lot to take in, but don't be daunted – you don't need to read it all at once. You might like to start by looking at the *Guide for Parents and Carers*, which is a shorter, more accessible introduction to SEN and the SEN Code.

Then read 1:21 of the SEN Code itself – this is the most important part for you as an SEN governor. This purple box gives all the duties of a governing body in relation to provision for SEN.

If you want to read more of the SEN Code, read chapter 5 if you are the SEN governor of a primary school and chapter 6 if you are a secondary school governor.

As you get more involved in SEN issues in your school, you will probably want to dip into other bits of the SEN Code. There is an index at the back to help you find what you need (p208), and a list of commonly used words and phrases, with their meanings, to help explain key terms (p201).

Essentials – what are special educational needs?

‘Children with special educational needs all have learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most children of the same age.’ *A Guide for Parents and Carers*, page 4.

Note that pupils do not have SEN just because:

- their first language is not English
- they have a physical disability – a pupil may have only one arm, but be well able to access the curriculum
- of a medical diagnosis or condition.

For the full legal definition, see 1:3 of the SEN Code.

What does an SEN governor do?

As SEN governor, you are the link person between the governing body and the school in relation to pupils with SEN. It is your role to help raise awareness of SEN issues at governing body meetings and give up-to-date information on SEN provision

within the school. You also help review the school’s policy on provision for pupils with SEN and ensure that parents have confidence in this provision.

It is important that you visit the school to remain well informed. This would usually mean a visit once a term, as well as attending governing body meetings. But it might be more, or less, depending on your own personal commitments and the nature of SEN provision in your school.

Be informed

Taking the time and effort to find out about SEN pays dividends in terms of your usefulness to the school. It doesn’t have to mean hours of heavy reading – although some reading will be useful. You can talk to many people to find out what you need to know (see section on *Who’s who*).

There is certain basic information that every SEN governor should know.

i. How the school identifies children with SEN

Make sure you understand how the school identifies a pupil with SEN and what happens once a pupil has been identified (5:37–5:42 of the SEN Code for primary schools and 6:41–6:49 for secondary schools). Different pupils need different help. The school arranges help for pupils with SEN on a step-by-step basis called the graduated approach – this is explained on page 8 of the *Guide for Parents and Carers*.

ii. How SEN money from LEAs is allocated and spent

Different LEAs organise how money is allocated to SEN in different ways. You should understand how your LEA provides SEN resources and how your head teacher and governing body decide how these resources are spent for all pupils with SEN in your school.

iii. The school's SEN policy

You should know your school's policy on SEN and make sure it is reviewed regularly. Regular reviews are vital to ensure that the SEN provision reflects the changing needs of the school community and takes account of any changes in the school's circumstances and the law.

The Governors' Annual Report to Parents should comment on the effectiveness of the school's SEN policy and any changes to it. Your head teacher and SENCO might welcome your assistance in drafting the SEN section of this report.

Essentials – your school's SEN policy

You should ask for a copy of the school's SEN policy and read it through.

An outline of what has to be in your school's policy can be found in the *SEN Code of Practice* (p197 if yours is a mainstream school; p198–9 if it is a special school or a special school in a hospital).

You might ask:

- who is involved in reviewing the SEN policy?
- does the policy reflect and meet the needs of the pupils?
- what does it say about supporting pupils in their transfer to and from other schools?
- when was the policy last reviewed and when will it be reviewed next?

Building relationships

Developing good relationships with the key people involved in SEN in the school is essential. It is particularly important to get to know the head teacher and the SENCO and establish a good working relationship with them.



SEN governor, Maureen Shepherd, and head teacher, Peter Westlake, meet to update on SEN in their school.



Bradley Golding, SEN governor, at an informal SEN meeting with head teacher, Gill Mallard, and SENCO, Louise Burnham.

Getting things done – 1

After attending LEA training with the SENCO on the *SEN Code of Practice*, the SEN Governor realised that the school was not up-to-date with its SEN policy. She encouraged the governing body to develop a school action plan to respond to the SEN Code.

A school cannot be truly effective in providing for pupils with SEN unless all those involved are fully committed to raising the achievement of all pupils. SEN should be considered as an integral part of the school's development planning (see 1:39 in the SEN Code for responsibilities of staff).

Essentials – what not to do

An SEN governor should not intervene in the teaching of individual pupils. If parents approach you with a complaint or a problem, encourage them to talk to the head teacher first. If the problem leads the parents to make a formal complaint, the first appeal is to the governing body.

It is also worth noting that an SEN governor does not have the right to see a pupil's statement of SEN without permission. The rules on this are outlined on page 116 of the SEN Code.

Asking questions

Most head teachers and SENCOs welcome a critical friend who can bring a fresh and objective view point. If you are uncertain about any aspects of how the school is addressing the needs of pupils with SEN – ask.

Getting things done – 2

An infant school re-designed its playground to include areas of visual contrast to help those pupils with visual impairment to be included more fully at playtime. The SEN governor at the school thought it would be a good idea to also paint school doorknobs to further assist visually impaired pupils – the head teacher and staff wholeheartedly agreed.



Bradley Golding and Louise Burnham in re-designed infant school playground.

Who's who – the roles of key people in SEN provision

Chair of governors: ensures that the governing body conducts its affairs properly and makes sure that all members have the opportunity to contribute to discussion and decision making.

Educational psychologist (EP): an employee of the LEA who works with schools and parents to assess a pupil's special educational needs and helps plan future provision.

Learning support assistant (LSA): a teaching assistant who provides support to pupils with SEN and/or disabilities and/or supports their teachers.

Parent: this includes any person who has parental or caring responsibility for a pupil.

SEN Co-ordinator (SENCO): a designated teacher with responsibility for day-to-day co-ordination of SEN arrangements within a school or early education setting.

SEN governor: most governing bodies appoint a governor or a sub-committee to have specific oversight over arrangements for SEN.

You might also find it useful to look at the table of roles and responsibilities in 1:39 of the SEN Code, which covers maintained mainstream schools, maintained special schools and early education settings.

Helpful suggestions

It is impossible to give a definitive checklist of all actions an SEN governor should take each term. As a minimum, you should:

- attend governing body meetings
- take a central role in discussions about SEN
- visit the school as often as you need to in order to remain fully informed.

What follows is a list of ideas, drawn from good practice, which you may find useful. There is also a list of questions that you could ask to help you find out important information about your school. Most of these suggestions apply to both mainstream and special schools.

As you get more involved in SEN, and become more experienced, it is important not to become 'over professionalised' and lose your lay person's perspective. A vital part of your role is to make sure that SEN issues are not marginalised, but are considered as a core part of decisions made within the school.

Suggested reading

- the school's SEN policy
- the school's development plan
- the school's most recent Annual Report to Parents
- the *SEN Code of Practice*
- the *Guide for Parents and Carers*
- a magazine called *Special Children* – ask your SENCO if the school has back copies
- articles in the education press about SEN, e.g. in the *Times Educational Supplement*
- other material from the further reading list.

Keeping in touch with the school

- Arrange with the head teacher/SENCO to spend time in school – a day or half a day – observing class/group work, to understand how the school organises and delivers SEN provision.
- Set up a regular meeting with the SENCO to discuss current issues.
- Have informal chats with the head teacher, teaching staff and learning support staff whenever the opportunity arises.
- Be accessible – go to social evenings to meet parents, pupils and staff.

Useful questions

You should know:

- how many pupils in your school have SEN
- how many pupils are at *School Action*, *School Action Plus* or have statements of special educational needs
- how many staff have a particular role in relation to SEN
- how much money the school gets for pupils with SEN and how it is spent.

You could ask:

- What is the range of SEN in your school?
- Who in the school does the LEA inform when a pupil has SEN and who, in turn, informs the staff? (see 1:19 in the SEN Code)
- Who is responsible for telling parents that a pupil has SEN and about the provision made for them?
- What special facilities does the school have for particular needs?
- What does the LEA provide at *School Action Plus*? (see p10 of the *Guide for Parents and Carers* for an explanation of this term)

- How has the school planned for the inclusion of disabled pupils?
- How does the school's SEN policy link with its other policies, such as those for behaviour and health and safety?
- What SEN training is available for the school staff, and does it meet their needs?

Taking part in training

If your time allows:

- ask to be involved in some school training relating to SEN
- attend LEA training for governors
- find out if the LEA has meetings for SENCOs – and, if appropriate, ask if you can go along to one with your SENCO.

Getting a wider perspective

It may be useful to find out about your school's links with:

- other local schools in relation to pupils with SEN
- the LEA and its SEN support services
- external agencies such as health, social services and voluntary agencies
- the local parent partnership service (contact details can be found in the *Guide for Parents and Carers*, p51–54).

Important words and phrases for SEN governors

As in any specialist area, there are a number of key words and phrases used by people when talking about SEN.

Essentials – terms you should understand

Annual review
 Individual Education Plan (IEP) and Group Education Plan
 School Action
 School Action Plus
 Statement of SEN
 Transition Plan

These are the essential SEN terms you should understand. You can find out what these mean by looking in the glossary of the *SEN Code of Practice* (p201–207) and the *Guide for Parents and Carers* (p39–41). If you come across other terms you don't understand – don't be afraid to ask.

Further reading and useful websites

- SEN Toolkit
- Inclusive Schooling: Children with special education needs
- Accessible Schools: planning to increase access to schools for disabled pupils

The above publications can be ordered free from DfES Publications Centre 0845 602 2260 (e-mail: dfes@prolog.uk.com).

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sen/>

<http://www.inclusion.ngfl.gov.uk>

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/teachingassistants>

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/governor/index.cfm>

