



The role of a school improvement partner (SIP) for a special school

School improvement partners

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Introduction

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the School Improvement Partner's Brief. This can be found at <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=8508>.

The school improvement partner (SIP) programme aims to provide school leaders with challenge and support from people who have demonstrable skills and experience in school improvement, and who understand the realities of school leadership. The SIP function is the same regardless of the phase or type of school to which a SIP is deployed. However, the means by which SIPs carry out this function, and the support that they can expect from local authorities, regional networks and National Frameworks, may vary according to the nature of the school setting. This advice seeks to clarify the nature of SIP work in special schools.

The guiding principles

The guiding principles of this programme are common to all SIPs. However, special school SIPs will need specific knowledge and experience, as set out below:

- focus on pupil progress and attainment across the ability range
 - familiarity with the strategies and techniques special schools use in assessing the wide range of individual learning needs, the target-setting processes deployed and systems to measure and accurately record attainment
 - awareness that special schools have been imaginative in using a wide range of quantitative and qualitative evidence to recognise achievement
- respect for the school's autonomy
 - knowledge of what is distinctive about the provision within a special school, the particular needs of the pupils and its role in the wider school community
- professional challenge and support
 - the ability to interrogate pupil performance data and, using knowledge of the pupils' needs and nature of the school, determine whether the practice and performance can be improved (mostly, this data will be specific to the individual school, relying heavily on teacher assessment)
- evidence-based assessment
 - familiarity with the different range of evidence and pupil attainment data available in special schools, which will include an awareness of the impact of specific learning needs and behaviours on pupil attainment and progress so that the SIP can judge if the evidence collected is valid and reliable.

Professional support and development

SIPs will be briefed by the local authority about the special schools to which they are being deployed. This briefing will include a range of materials that provide detailed and relevant information on the standards the school is achieving and the development of the school over

time. SIPs should be aware, however, that there may be some data held centrally, especially about pupil achievement and progress. Consistent local and national data sets are being developed, for example, RAISEonline is being expanded to include those pupils measured against the P scales.

SIPs who are allocated to non-maintained special schools will be briefed according to the particular individual circumstances of the school. Sources of the briefing and other relevant information may include local authorities.

SIPs will be offered a range of learning opportunities, enabling them to be fully informed about their role and the most effective ways to carry it out. Professional development will:

- be tailored and specific to the SIP's identified needs
- link with other professional development provision
- link to performance review processes
- have a national and local dimension.

Special school SIPs will be encouraged to participate in development that is available for SIPs in all phases, sharing materials and events when this is appropriate. There will, however, be materials and events that will be unique to special school SIPs.

There are many fewer special schools within local authorities and regions than mainstream schools. Consequently, there will be fewer SIPs for this phase, which could risk diminished peer-group support and specialised development. The National Strategies will seek to overcome this issue by providing SIPs and their employing authorities with opportunities to collaborate and share good practice. SIP manager meetings, a valued and successful feature of the primary and secondary programmes, will be run for the special programme.

Through performance management processes delivered by local authorities, special school SIPs will have the opportunity to receive feedback on their performance, discuss their development needs and reflect on their own performance. Professional development will be tailored to meet these identified needs.

The National Strategies have responsibility for providing national events such as induction for SIPs. Planning for these events will focus on meeting SIPs' development needs and will recognise the distinctive issues associated with special schools.

Pupil progress

This section should be read in conjunction with the very much more detailed guidance document *Use of data in special schools by school improvement partners (SIPs)* ref: 00073-2007BKT-EN.

As a special school SIP, it is important to understand the many different ways in which pupils can make progress. SIPs will need to be familiar with:

- the range of performance indicators/descriptors that are used across all age ranges in special schools
- the National Curriculum levels that are likely to be reached and the pupils who can achieve these levels
- the additional accredited courses that are followed in the school and the expected levels to be achieved.

Tracking pupil progress in special schools is complex. For example, in some cases pupils will have a generic level descriptor that may appear not to change over a period of years. This does not imply that the pupil has not made progress. Special schools will be reporting on the experiences these pupils have had in order to inform their current level, even though the final assessment may stay the same. Schools will want to discuss with their SIP that, for some pupils, maintenance of skills may be viewed as progress. At other times, the SIP may be presented with documentation that suggests a pupil has regressed to a lower level. The SIP will moderate the school's evidence and self-evaluation in order to arrive at secure judgements concerning the rate of pupil progress.

Every Child Matters (ECM)

A useful starting point for the SIP's enquiry about pupil progress could be the five ECM outcomes. This will reflect the holistic approach that most special schools adopt when they are developing their teaching, learning and curriculum frameworks.

The following table offers some useful prompts but is not an exclusive list.

ECM outcomes	Prompts
How well do pupils adopt healthy lifestyles?	Pupils: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o take regular exercise o know about and make healthy lifestyle choices o (where appropriate) understand sexual health risks, and the dangers of smoking and substance abuse o eat and drink healthily o recognise signs of personal stress and develop strategies to manage it o have access to a range of other professionals reflecting the additional needs that they have o have meaningful, concrete learning opportunities to apply skills in real-life settings o attend a school that is seeking to gain/has achieved the National Healthy School Status.

<p>How well do pupils adopt safe practices?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o the school has effective assessment practices that indicate the risks emerging from the pupils' additional educational needs o the knowledge and skills of staff take account of a pupil's additional educational needs and predict their impact in specific situations o pupils display concern for others and refrain from intimidating and anti-social behaviour o pupils feel safe from bullying and discrimination o pupils feel confident in reporting incidents and getting support if they are a victim o pupils understand key risks, such as those posed by some adults, and how to minimise them o pupils act responsibly in high-risk situations, such as in the use of tools and in physical contact sports o health and safety policies ensure that those with significant additional needs are kept safe.
<p>How well do pupils enjoy their education?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o the school is effective in responding to the range of pupils' needs o learners enjoy their education, as indicated by attitudes, behaviour, attendance and other factors o assessment practices accurately show the progress pupils are making in a way that is meaningful to them and others o those with limited communication skills have their voices heard o curriculum provision shows that pupils with SEN are at the heart of personalised learning o the views of parents/carers, school staff and other advocates are actively sought to indicate pupils' attitudes to school.
<p>How well do pupils make a positive contribution to the community?</p>	<p>Pupils:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o have access to all aspects of community life regardless of additional educational needs o are supported to express their views at school and participate in decision-making, taking account of any additional needs in communication o take part in and initiate a range of organised activities in school and community organisations o manage or are supported to make changes at key points of transition o have the knowledge and understanding to become informed citizens o have access to the community beyond school as a learning environment o frequently interact with key representatives of the community within the school o are provided with a support network that enables access to the community through integrated children's and adult services o are supported by voluntary agencies which are included in the broad range of providers.

<p>How well do pupils develop skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?</p>	<p>Pupils:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o access relevant curriculum pathways to meet the full range of individual needs o develop basic skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT o develop key life skills to promote independent living o develop self-confidence and team-working skills o have access to a balanced curriculum that takes account of their additional educational needs o have access to a range of nationally recognised accreditation opportunities o become enterprising, able to handle change, take initiative and calculate risk when making decisions o become financially literate o have access to specialist advice that accurately recognises the pupils' potential for independent living and the means to fulfil this potential o when older, know the full range of life options and acquire the knowledge and skills related to independent or supported living, including workplace situations, through work experience, other work-related activities and supported adult experiences o have access to and take up dedicated post-16 opportunities for education and training o are involved with other agencies in preparing for transition from school o are provided with the appropriate resources through an integrated children's and adult services system that aids transition o know what other agencies, including voluntary groups, provide support o are included in systematic planning for transition alongside parents and carers.
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Targets

Schools set their own targets. For special schools, as for others, these include statutory targets. However, these targets will be expressed in a way that reflects the particular setting of the individual school. Also, the special school may seek to set a number of optional targets, which take account of the complex learning needs of the pupils on its roll.

The SIP should encourage the school to be appropriately ambitious for the progress of individuals and groups of pupils. The SIP will examine the target-setting process, including the range of evidence that the school has used to arrive at its decisions. Separate guidance has been issued to SIPs about the data that a special school can call upon, which can be found in *Use of data in special schools by school improvement partners (SIPs)*. The particular challenge for SIPs working with special schools is to recognise the breadth of provision, and the range of targets that can and should be set, to encourage ambition in every area of the pupils' achievement.

Advice to the governing body about the headteacher's performance management

The process of giving advice should be consistent with the guidance given in the regulations about performance management. However, special school SIPs may have greater challenges in helping governors:

- to come to a judgement about the headteacher's success in achieving the previous year's objectives, particularly in relation to pupil attainment and progress
- to set specific, measurable and realistic objectives for the forthcoming year
- to set objectives that take account of the full range of special school provision.

SIPs should be able to capture the particular nature of each school as they advise the headteacher and governors on appropriate performance indicators. They need to offer advice in a form which will be readily accessible to a wide audience.

Staffing

SIPs will want to assure themselves that the school's leadership team is using performance management to gather evidence about the effective recruitment and deployment of the most appropriate staff so that the vision of the school can be realised.

SIPs will find that most special schools have developed complex staffing structures built around multi-disciplinary teams, where a diverse range of staff fulfil some of the roles traditionally carried out by teachers. Whilst this may be entirely appropriate, and consistent with the principles of recent workforce reforms, SIPs will want to satisfy themselves that these decisions arise by design and not from expediency.

Brokering support

It is for the school to decide what external support it needs to achieve its aims. Some of this support is likely to be provided by the local authority, but much may be sought from providers beyond the authority, including other mainstream and special schools.

As a result, the special school, in partnership with the SIP, will need to consider:

- looking more widely to regional networks, such as the SEN partnerships; or even nationally, to specialist SEN bodies that focus on specific, identified learning needs
- forming their own networks of schools locally, and further afield, where there are common areas of interest.

There may be a greater expectation on special school SIPs, compared with their mainstream colleagues, to have a leading role in brokering support. Special school SIPs should ensure that they stay abreast of regional and national initiatives and maintain their own professional networks so that they can fulfil this expectation.

Finally, there is an additional dimension to the SIP's brokerage of support: to use the expertise of the special school to meet the needs of other schools, including mainstream. The resulting support could be two-way, both to and from the school. In this way, SIPs could be catalysts for further inclusive practices within and beyond individual authorities.

Wider community

In the initial stages, the focus of the work of the special school SIP will be with the headteacher and the school leadership team. However, as this role becomes embedded, it will extend to take account of the impact of the many professionals working with the pupils. The SIP will want to evaluate the contribution these staff may have to the pupils' progress.

Often schools are allocated or employ support from a range of children's services. Some of these may include:

- speech and language therapists
- physiotherapists
- occupational therapists
- nursing staff
- behaviour support staff
- educational psychologists
- clinical psychologists
- mental health workers
- drama and music therapists
- educational welfare officers
- advisory teachers and/or support staff.

It is becoming increasingly common to see these services built into the staffing allocation for the school and for some of these staff to be taking dual teaching roles in schools. Each of these professionals may provide a separate level of knowledge about individual pupils. It is important for the special school SIP to get a clear understanding of the targets such professionals set for the pupils, and the impact their work has on pupils' wellbeing and on their attitudes and skills.

The wider community will be used by the school to extend teaching and learning opportunities. One of the key aims of many special schools is to provide pupils with the skills to live independently in the community. The community may provide the SIP with another evidence base on which to judge the school's success.

Specialist school status

Increasingly, special schools are aspiring to and gaining specialist school status. As with all schools, the thrust for this should be to raise standards. Therefore, the school's specialism forms part of the dialogue between the leadership team and the SIP. To enable the alignment of re-designation with Ofsted inspections, a move planned to take effect during 2007, the SIP's reports of visits should comment on the impact of the specialism.

There may be cases where a school considers it is ready to apply for specialist status. In such cases this may be discussed with the SIP, who may help the school to advance their bid through their brokering role.

Finally, SIPs should keep themselves fully informed about the developing SEN specialism that has been introduced in order to encourage more special schools to achieve this status.

Special schools that cause concern

SIPs have a key role in relation to schools that are causing concern. There may be occasions where a SIP has concerns about the capacity of a school to improve and cannot secure agreement on the action required to make a difference. In such cases the SIP, having made these concerns explicit to the headteacher and governors, should alert the local authority.

In the case of a non-maintained special school, the SIP would make the trustees aware and the DfES would need to be informed.

In the case of mainstream schools, local authorities have adopted a number of indicators to guide SIPs about when these concerns should trigger action. Indeed, authorities publish these triggers as part of their system for school categorisation, agree these with headteachers and train SIPs to apply them consistently.

SIPs should find that the local authority has a similar framework for special schools. Some indicators will be common to all schools, for example poor financial management. However, other indicators, which are certain to trigger intervention in a mainstream setting, might be more complex to judge in a special school. Whilst this is a complex area, SIPs should not demur from making these judgements where the evidence makes a compelling case. Equally, the SIP should expect the authority to have adopted relevant performance indicators for special schools. Without this, the impact of the SIP programme will not be fully felt within special schools, particularly BESD schools.

Frequently asked questions

1. What is the new relationship with schools?

The intention of the new relationship with schools (NRwS) is to give schools greater freedom and autonomy to identify and plan for their own improvement. The SIP programme, introduced as part of this new relationship, aims to provide challenge and support from a body of accredited professionals (SIPs) who have demonstrable skills and experience in promoting school improvement. Several strands of the NRwS, including SIPs, were tested by over 90 schools in 8 local authorities in the 2004/05 academic year. Secondary SIPs were brought in during 2005/06. At the same time, the DfES piloted the primary SIP programme and trialled SIPs in special schools.

2. Why have you decided to allocate SIPs to special schools?

Evidence from the special schools trial, involving 26 special schools in 7 local authorities (led by the National Strategies and evaluated by a team from the Faculty of Education, Cambridge University), unequivocally supported the extension of the SIP programme to special schools. The strongest advocates for this were the headteachers themselves.

3. Is it a full-time position?

In general, no. Most SIPs work part-time in the SIP role, in addition to their duties, for example, as serving headteachers or local authority school improvement advisers. We do not expect that people will want to work as SIPs full-time, though some recently retired headteachers and consultants have become SIPs to several schools.

4. What about funding?

Local authorities receive a grant to help fund the SIP role. Local authorities will receive funding for secondary or primary special schools at the same level as their mainstream counterparts. An all-age special school will be treated as a secondary school.

5. When will SIPs be allocated to special schools?

SIPs will be allocated to special schools in three waves: September 2007, January 2008 and April 2008.

6. When will my school be allocated a SIP?

Each local authority was invited to indicate which wave they would wish to join. On the basis of the requests received, and taking into account certain financial considerations, the DfES has allocated local authorities to one of three waves.

7. How does someone become a SIP?

National advertisements for special school SIPs will be placed periodically in the education press. The National Strategies will supply local authorities with details of accredited SIPs willing to work in their area. Local authorities will then apply their own recruitment and selection procedures.

8. How do I get selected for the accreditation event?

Applicants are required to complete an online application form, an online self-assessment and to provide two referees. The online self-assessment tool is provided to help the candidate understand the tasks involved in interpreting data in order to make judgements about the quality of education, standards achieved and progress made by the school.

9. What form will the accreditation take?

The first day of the two-day residential programme is composed of a number of facilitated sessions, providing candidates with development opportunities related to the role of the SIP. The second day comprises a series of assessment activities based on the SIP person specification, the outcome of which will determine whether a candidate is awarded SIP accreditation.

The National College for School Leadership and the National Strategies believe that it is not feasible to address every aspect of the SIP role in a two-day programme and so it focuses upon those aspects of the specification that are central to the role. Further development will be through an induction programme for all accredited special school SIPs, and an entitlement to continuing professional development for those engaged to work with schools provided in partnership with deploying local authorities and the National Strategies.

10. What background do you expect special school SIPs to come from?

The SIP will be a crucial link in promoting improvement in a special school. Therefore, the SIP must have significant knowledge and experience of the leadership and management of special schools and related issues, such as the tracking of pupils' progress, monitoring and evaluating standards, and creating plans for future improvement. This will include a thorough knowledge of the wider children's agenda.

The trial indicated that the most appropriate background for a SIP would be successful leadership of a special school, preferably as a headteacher although this was not universally the case (some people without this experience were effective special school SIPs).

11. What if I have already gained accreditation as a primary or secondary SIP?

At each stage of the rollout of SIPs to a phase it has been felt by all, including the headteachers, that a potential SIP should demonstrate their expertise by successfully completing accreditation. Therefore, those who have successfully achieved accreditation as a SIP for the secondary phase have been required to repeat the process to gain accreditation as a primary SIP. Both in terms of equity and in order to provide a fully accredited pool, those seeking to be deployed as SIPs to special schools will also have to gain accreditation. We are therefore opening up a third route of accreditation, to special school headteachers and special needs advisers.

Many special schools are all-age; a special school SIP accreditation route can also cater for this.

12. How do I get deployed to a special school?

The process will be similar to that for mainstream. Once accreditation has been achieved, the SIP's details are displayed on the SIP manager database. SIPs are required to regularly update their details. These details include the number of schools that a SIP is prepared to be deployed to and the local authorities in which they would be willing to work. There will be a significant addition to these details for special school SIPs. They will be required to indicate the nature of the special school that they feel sufficiently experienced to support, for example PMLD or BESD.

Local authority SIP managers have access to this database and will be able to view the details of those SIPs who have indicated that they are prepared to be deployed to that authority. Different authorities have developed different procedures for selecting the most appropriate SIPs from the database, but SIPs should anticipate that they are most likely to be expected to attend an interview as a minimum requirement.

13. Will I have any training?

Once deployed by a local authority, a SIP has access to a range of training opportunities, some of which are required for continued accreditation. These include induction, training days led by the National Strategies and training delivered by the local authorities themselves. In addition, there is a developing electronic knowledge bank that provides SIPs with briefings in a number of forms.

Further reading

A New Relationship with Schools: the School Improvement Partner's Brief
<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=8508>.

Use of data in special schools by school improvement partners (SIPs): a guidance document
ref: 00073-2007BKT-EN.

Further information

School improvement partner's helpline	0845 850 1444
Email helpdesk	specialschoolsips@capita.co.uk

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