Early Years SEN Inclusion Fund (EY SENIF): Formal Consultation with Early Years Providers Report

Background

Barnet's early years providers continue to offer strong, inclusive practice, using high-quality ordinarily available strategies and resources to identify and support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Settings work proactively with families, apply the Assess–Plan–Do–Review cycle, and create nurturing, enabling environments that help most children make good progress within their universal provision.

However, some children require provision beyond what can reasonably be delivered through ordinarily available support alone. The Early Years SEN Inclusion Fund (SENIF) exists to ensure these children can access timely, targeted help that enables them to thrive within their early education placement. As set out in the EYFS and SENIF guidance, SENIF provides additional 'top-up' funding for children with emerging, developing or complex needs who require support above the universal offer.

Current challenges

Across Barnet, the complexity of need is rising, and a growing number of very young children are presenting with significant developmental, communication, regulatory or sensory needs. This reflects national trends and the extension of funded entitlements to younger age groups.

As a result, demand for SENIF has increased, and the current system, which often results in a focus on one-to-one staffing requests, is no longer the most effective or responsive way of meeting children's diverse needs. The review completed in 2024 highlighted that the existing arrangements:

- can delay access to support,
- are administratively burdensome for settings and the local authority, and
- do not always ensure the most equitable or developmentally appropriate type of provision for children.

Why change is needed

Nurseries are concerned about how they can afford to support young people, however from the SENIF review we can clearly see that Barnet was funding significantly higher than most of its strategic neighbours. Barnet offers a high level of support through their Local Inclusion Support Offer by the Early Years SEND Team and support from the Early Years Standards Team. Early Years SEND Advisory Teachers support settings to implement Ordinarily Available Provision and offer training to upskill staff.

The purpose of reform is not about reducing spend, but about getting support to more children, earlier, more equitably and in ways that better reflect emerging and complex needs. The new proposed Emerging Needs Model, a three-banded structure aligned with national DfE expectations, aims to:

- widen access and ensure children receive the right level of support more quickly,
- create a clearer and more transparent system for providers and families,
- promote interventions that are evidence-based and impact-focused, and
- make the process more administratively efficient so that funding flows to children rather than paperwork.

Ultimately, the intention is to strengthen inclusion in Barnet's early years system by ensuring children with SEND receive the right help, at the right time, in the setting that knows them best.

Consultation

Barnet Local Authority put forward a Three-Band Model for formal consultation with early years providers and settings. The full consultation papers can be found in the Appendices at the end of this report.

The online consultation was open between Monday 20th October and Monday 24th November 2025.

All leads and SENCos of early years settings were invited to contribute on behalf of their colleagues.

The consultation was shared multiple times. It was distributed directly to early years settings, SENCos and headteachers. As well as being advertised through local authority services and updates, such as the School Circular and communications with school governors.

There were 25 respondents, with 21-25 responses per question.

Results

This report presents key themes from responses to each of the EY SENIF consultation questions.

1. What do you consider to be the benefits of the proposed banded approach?

Respondents generally appreciated the clarity and structure that the proposed banding offers. Many highlighted that having defined bands provides transparency and consistency in funding decisions, making it easier for settings to plan provision. The frequency of panel meetings and the ability to apply at any time were seen as significant improvements, reducing delays and supporting timely intervention. Some also noted that the approach could help ensure resources are allocated fairly based on need, and that it acknowledges varying levels of complexity among children.

For example, one **Head Teacher** stated, *"The amount reflects the needs of each individual child's needs."* Similarly, a **Deputy Manager & SENCo** commented, *"A clear amount of money is set for each child, seems to be clear in expectations."* A **Deputy Headteacher / EYFS Leader** reinforced this by saying, *"The banding provides clarity for settings, thus enabling forward planning for children with complex needs on entry to nursery."* Another positive view came from a **SENDCO**, who noted, *"Panel sits weekly so funding will be allocated quicker."*

2. What do you consider to be the challenges of the proposed banded approach?

While the concept was broadly understood, respondents raised concerns about practical implementation. The most frequent challenge cited was the funding level, which many felt does not reflect actual staffing costs, particularly for children with complex needs. Other challenges include the perception that there is a reliance on external professional evidence, which can delay applications, and the administrative workload involved. Some settings expressed concern about potential subjectivity in panel decisions and the absence of early years representation.

As one **Nursery Lead** explained, *"The amount of proposed funding does not equate to the amount a school would need to pay for their lowest paid support staff."* Another respondent stated, *"The fund offered is insufficient to meet the SEN children needs in the settings. This will affect the children progress and will put the settings in severe financial difficulties."* An **Assistant SENDCo** added, *"Band 2 and 3 criteria are almost impossible to meet because of long waiting lists and lack of outside professional input."* Concerns about representation were also raised, with a **Head Teacher** noting, *"As there is no representation at panel from a Barnet Advisory SENCO at the point when the SENIF application goes to panel, there is no voice representing the child's needs."*

3. Would your setting be able to provide sufficient evidence within the application form to support banding decisions?

Most respondents were confident they could provide evidence through observations, support plans, and internal assessments. However, they acknowledged that delays in obtaining professional reports could be a barrier. Several suggested clearer guidance on acceptable evidence and flexibility in cases where external input is unavailable. Overall, there was a positive willingness to comply, provided expectations are well defined.

For instance, a **Nursery Manager & SENCO** shared, *"Yes, through observations, using SEN toolkit. However, would love to also have another assessment kit particularly on communication."* An **Assistant SENDCo** explained, *"When we have access to professional reports we can, otherwise we are trying to show the evidence with screenings and assessments done by school."* Similarly, a **Deputy Manager & SENCo** said, *"I am not sure what other evidence the nursery could provide, other than support plans to show sustained intervention."* Another respondent highlighted the challenge of external evidence, stating, *"The barrier would be reports or advice from external professionals."* (**Nursery Lead**).

4. Are there any areas of the proposal you feel could be improved or made clearer?

Key suggestions focused on enhancing clarity and efficiency of the proposed model. Respondents asked for:

- **Clearer guidance** on evidence requirements and professional involvement.
- **Examples** of completed forms and case studies.
- **Faster turnaround times** and emergency funding options for children with complex needs entering mid-term.
- **Application form redesign** to make it more targeted and user-friendly.
- Inclusion of **early years representatives on panels** to ensure informed decisions.

Respondents emphasised the need for practical resources and clearer instructions. A **Deputy Manager & SENCo** requested, *"What evidence you are looking for and how to fill in the forms."* Similarly, a **Deputy Headteacher / EYFS Leader** suggested, *"Exemplars of the form and case studies need to be shared to enable settings to make evaluations."* The urgency for quicker processes was highlighted by another respondent who said, *"It would be extremely helpful if there was an opportunity to apply for emergency funding for a child who has entered nursery without any specialist SEN involvement but clearly has complex needs."* A **SENCO** added, *"Application form should be updated to reflect new system."* Finally, a **Manager** stressed, *"An early years SEND representative should sit on the complex needs panel—they know us and they know the children we are working with."*

5. What training or information do you think your setting needs to support you in implementing planning for SENIF?

While many felt confident with current knowledge, others requested targeted support such as:

- **Training on thresholds for each band** to ensure staff understand the criteria and how to apply them consistently.
- **Guidance on completing applications** effectively, including **examples of completed forms and case studies**.
- **Support in completing applications**, particularly for staff new to the process such as new SENCos who may need additional help navigating the system.
- **Occasional check-ins or workshops**, both online and in-person, to clarify processes and provide ongoing updates.

A **Group SEND Lead** emphasised the need for training, stating, *"Understanding the different thresholds and how to identify a child's needs. We have internal inclusion teams that would all benefit from this type of training."* For guidance and practical examples, one respondent suggested, *"General guidelines to support staff in implementing planning for SENIF."* To support those unfamiliar with the process, a **SENDCO** noted, *"Explanation to all nursery teachers on the different level of bandings so they understand this."* Finally, a **Deputy Manager** highlighted the importance of ongoing support, saying, *"In person and online sessions to check*

in but also the area SENCO support in applying. The council could help us to fill the forms with the information we would provide."

6. Do you have any further comments or feedback?

The dominant theme was a strong commitment to inclusion and early intervention. Respondents emphasised that funding levels should enable meaningful support, as inadequate resources risk undermining these goals. There were calls for funding to reflect real costs and for trust in practitioners' expertise. Overall, the opportunity to shape improvements and provide constructive feedback to strengthen the model was welcomed.

One respondent highlighted the importance of child-focused decisions, stating, *"Whatever changes you intend to make, it should only be in favour of the child in need of early intervention and not focused on monetary."* (Nursery Manager & SENCO) Another saw potential for positive change, saying, *"This is a real opportunity to reform."*

Summary and Recommendations

Overall, respondents welcomed the clarity and structure of the proposed banded approach, while offering constructive feedback to enhance implementation. Proposed recommendations are outlined below.

- Working together with the Early Years Team, the local authority will consider adjusting the funding for our most complex young people.
- Maintain weekly panels and flexible application windows to support timely intervention.
- Provide clear guidance on evidence requirements and acceptable alternatives.
- It was suggested to include Early Years specialists on panels for informed decision-making. The local authority propose that Complex Needs Panel will consult with Early Years SEND team if they feel they need further support or expertise.
- Offer targeted training and practical examples to support settings.
- There will be ongoing support and training provided on Ordinarily Available provision to support and equip all practitioners with up-to-date knowledge and strategies.
- In addition, continued training and tailored support will be delivered to address specific SEND needs, enabling settings to respond effectively to the diverse requirements of children.