

SEND POLICY

Summary of Findings

Taylor Hughson, Dev Tiwari, Loic Menzies et al, December 2025, v1.0





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Key takeaways | SEND systems operate under rising demand and persistent trade-offs

1. SEND identification is **rising** around the world, and many jurisdictions are facing **growing funding pressures**.
2. All jurisdictions aspire to educate more of their students with SEND within mainstream settings. However, an **increasing proportion** of students with SEND are educated **outside of mainstream settings**.
3. Finite public budgets drive a need for **funding prioritisation**.
4. Early selection and tracking can be a **barrier to inclusion**.
5. Devolved systems can allow for **local tailoring** and **greater responsiveness** but can also lead to **inconsistency and inequity**.

Questions for policymakers | SEND policy requires explicit choices

<i>Eligibility and assessment</i>	Should support be based primarily on diagnosed conditions or educational need?
	How should assessment balance flexibility, consistency, and cost?
<i>Funding and entitlement</i>	To what extent should funding follow individual students?
	How can systems prioritise limited resources while maintaining trust?
<i>Provision and inclusion</i>	What balance should exist between mainstream and specialist provision?
	What capacity is required for inclusion to operate in practice?
<i>System coordination</i>	How can education, health, and social services align around student need?
	How should stakeholders be involved in policymaking and reform?

RQ1 | What is SEND policy designed to achieve?

Across jurisdictions, SEND policy typically combines three aims:



SEND policy is generally expected to support students' learning within education while also enabling participation in wider society and preparation for adult life. These aims operate simultaneously rather than sequentially. In practice, systems balance them differently depending on resources, legal frameworks, and provision structures. As a result, policies that strengthen one aim may place pressure on the others.

Placement trends | Inclusion commitments coexist with rising separation

Across jurisdictions, a growing share of students with SEND are educated outside mainstream settings.

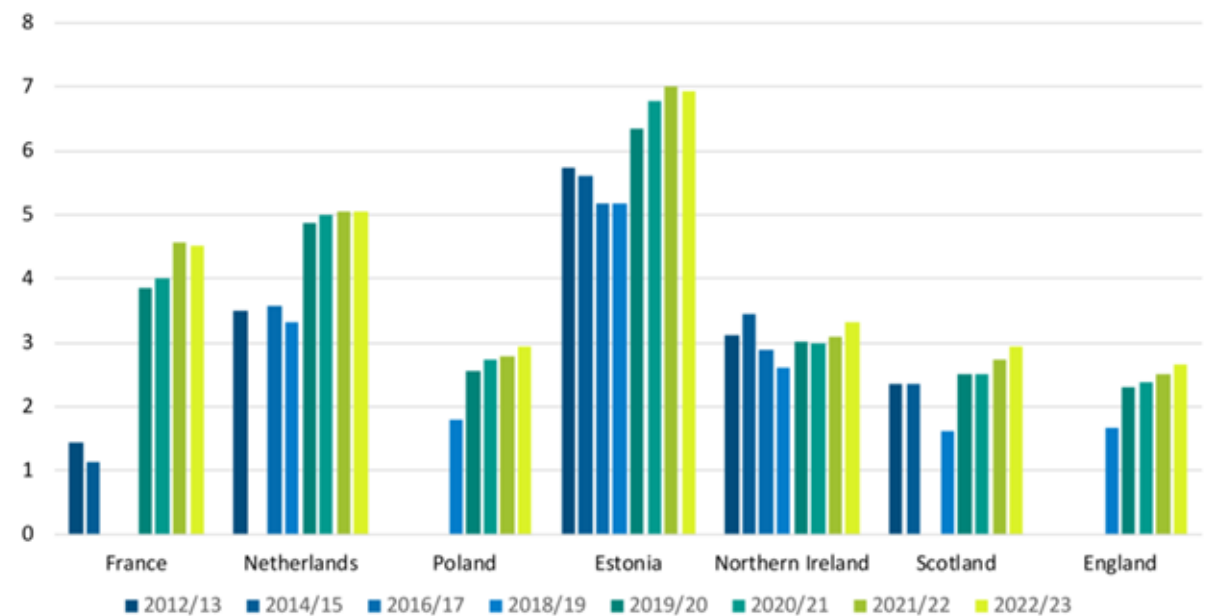
Observed pattern

While the policy direction in most jurisdictions is to expand mainstream education, system behaviour shows increasing use of non-mainstream provision.

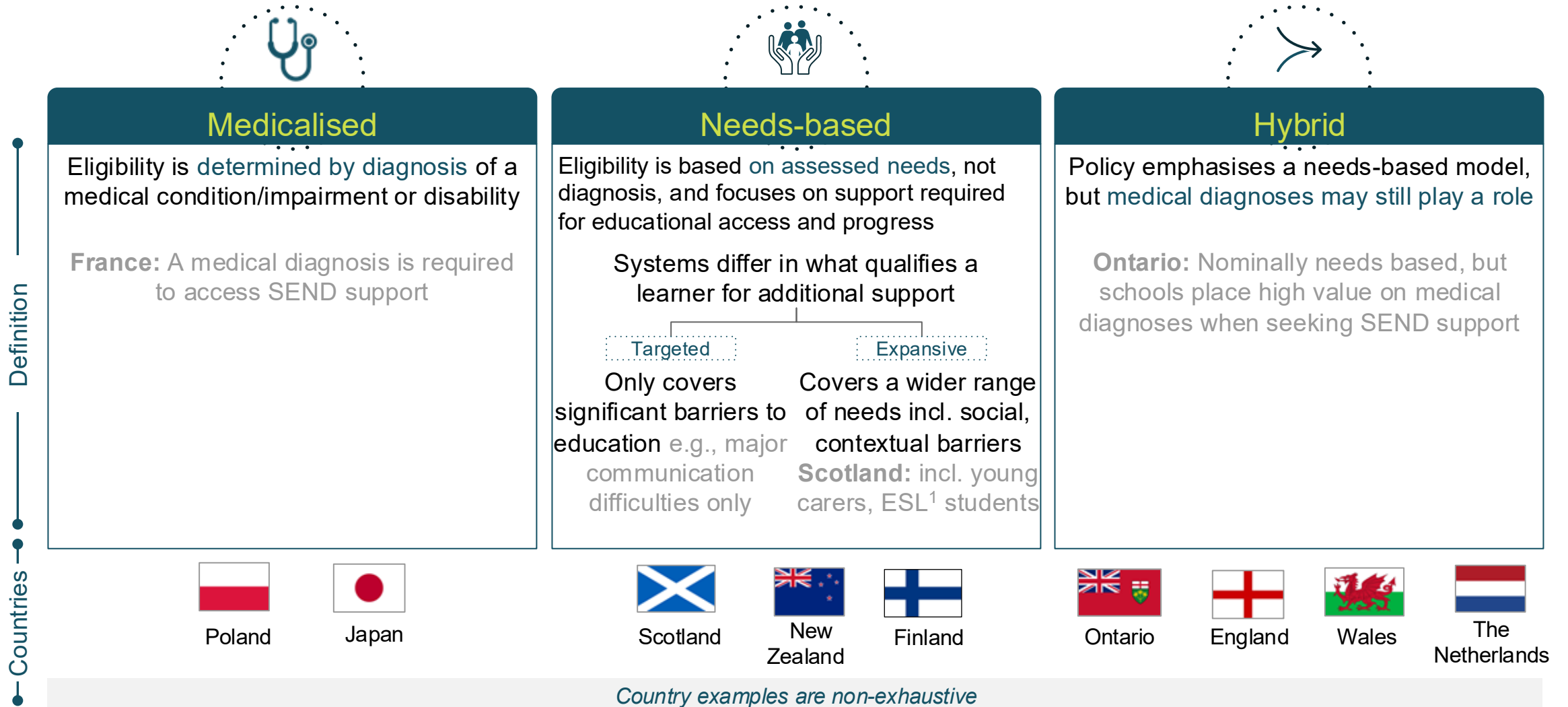
Common pressures identified include...

- Mainstream schools often have limited capacity and expertise to support diverse needs.
- Parents frequently seek specialist provision where they believe support will be more reliable.
- Legal enforceability of entitlements and advocacy pressures contribute to demand for formal provision.
- The complexity of need among students identified with SEND has increased.
- Political resistance to stronger inclusion reforms has been reported in some contexts.

Students enrolled in non-mainstream education settings



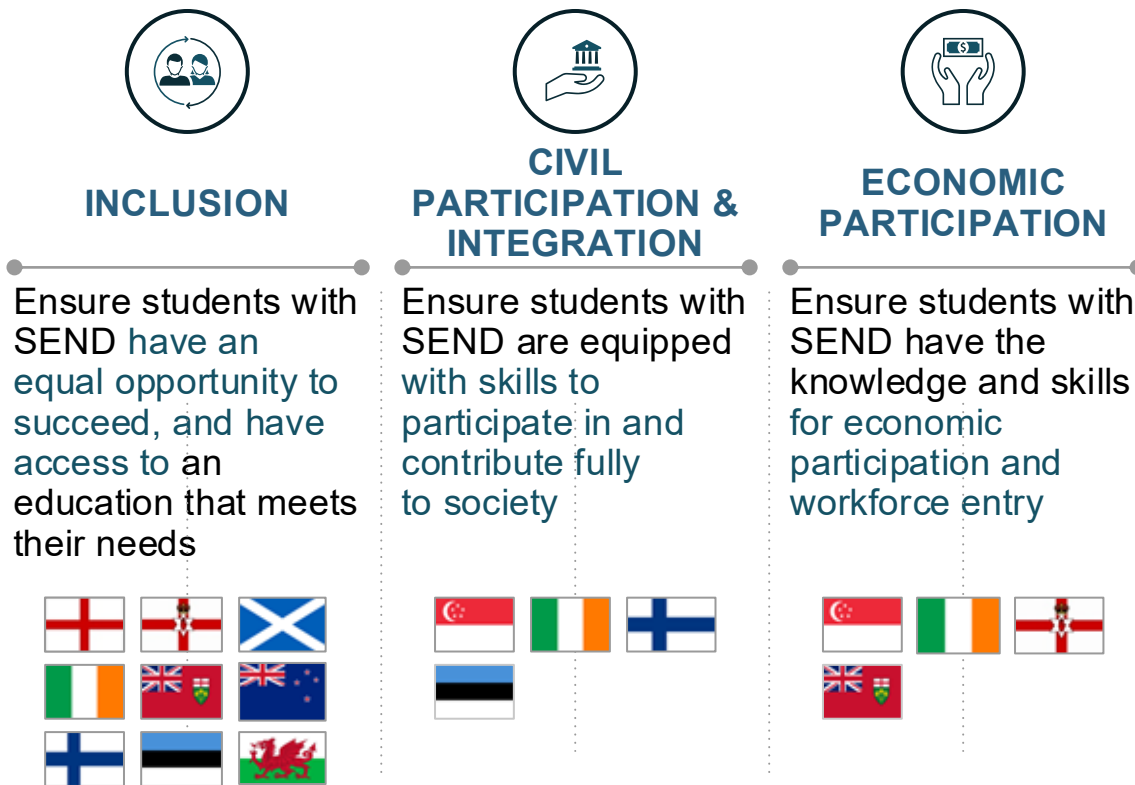
Conceptualisation | SEND definitions differ based on the level of emphasis placed on a medical diagnosis



1. English as a Second Language
 Source: CES Cross-Country report, CES Cross-country tables

Purpose and trends | Systems often pursue multiple objectives and trends simultaneously

Purpose | Stated purposes in policy documents emphasise a combination of 3 aims



Examples reflect prominently stated policy goals, and are illustrative not exhaustive

Trends | Emerging priorities show how aims are realized in practice

MOVE FROM MEDICALISED TO NEEDS-BASED

- England, Estonia, Poland, Japan and NZ shifting to more needs-based approaches
- Progress hindered by funding systems and societal attitudes that still tie SEND to medical diagnoses

MAINSTREAM MORE PUPILS WITH SEND

- Northern Ireland, Scotland, NL, Singapore and Japan aim to reduce enrollment in special needs schools
- Uneven implementation as class separation in mainstream schools can persist

INTEGRATE PROVISION ACROSS CARE

- Jurisdictions like England and New Zealand are seeking to improve coordination across other services supporting SEND (e.g., Health, Social care etc.)

Driven by an ambition to meet UNCRPD requirements in some cases

Trends | Policy direction and system pressures often diverge

Across jurisdictions, reforms move toward inclusion and needs-based support, but practical pressures shape implementation.

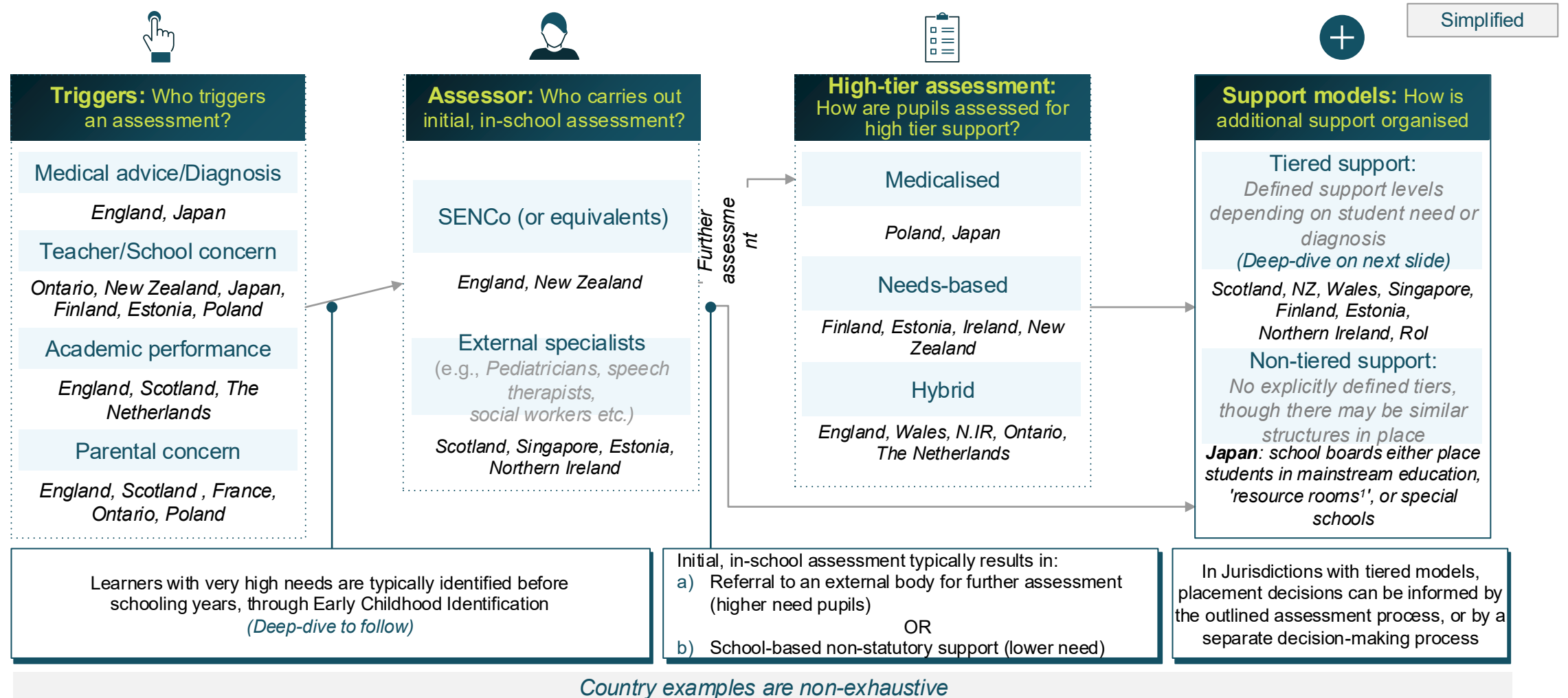
Direction of reform	Pressures shaping practice
Needs-based definitions	Diagnosis used to secure funded support
Mainstream inclusion	Parental demand for specialist provision
Integrated services	Separate eligibility thresholds across services
Early intervention	Assessment required to prioritise limited resources
Rights-based entitlement	Legal enforceability encourages formal identification

SEND policy outcomes reflect interaction between formal commitments and stakeholder responses.

RQ2| Policy structure consists of four main areas, each containing specific design elements which differ between systems

ASSESSMENT & IDENTIFICATION	SUPPORT	A TRACKING & REPORTING	FUNDING
<p>Triggers: What triggers an assessment?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medical diagnosis • Medical advice • Academic performance • Parental concern 	<p>Setting: What setting is SEND education typically provided in?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream settings • Specialist settings 	<p>Metrics: What is typically measured when assessing SEND?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inputs • Processes • Outcomes 	<p>Source: Who is the main provider of SEND funding?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central government • Local government
<p>Assessor: Who carries out initial, in-school assessments?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SENCOs • Teachers • External Specialists 	<p>Common support: What supports are provided in mainstream settings?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching assistants • Adapted instruction • Small-group support • Exam adjustments 	<p>Tools: How is progress measured?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliance reporting • Inspection • Self-evaluation • Surveys • Data (e.g., attainment, pathways) 	<p>Distributor: Who allocates funds?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central government • Local government
<p>Higher-tier assessment: How are pupils assessed for high tier support?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs-based assessment • Clinical assessment • Hybrid assessment • Multi-agency threshold 	<p>Differentiated support: What specific initiatives are offered?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion-focused supports • Curriculum /pedagogy supports • Assistive technology 	<p>Levels: At what level of the system is progress measured?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual schools • School groups • Local authorities • System-wide (often via sampling) 	<p>Type: How is Mainstream SEND funding allocated?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Census-based funding • Categorical funding • Hybrid funding
<p>Support models: How is additional support organised?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiered models • Non-tiered models 	<p>Teacher training: How is SEND covered in teacher training?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory training modules • Postgraduate certifications • Additional certifications 		

Assessment| Process starts with assessment for in-school support, followed by referral to external bodies if more support is needed



1. Resource rooms: a room for SEND pupils within a mainstream school which they commonly attend for a few hours a week for specialist support
 SENCO: Special Education Needs Coordinator; ROl: Republic of Ireland
 Source: SEND Master Cross Jurisdiction tables, CES SEND Policy Report

Support provision | Systems organise support through levels of intensity

Early childhood intervention
Support may begin before school entry

A

Universal provision

Support delivered within mainstream classrooms

- All jurisdictions expect mainstream schools to adapt teaching to meet diverse learning needs
- Universal provision may include differentiated instruction, classroom adjustments, and general learning support
- In some systems, specialist teachers contribute within mainstream settings

B

Targeted support

Additional support provided to students requiring more structured intervention

- Targeted provision often involves small-group instruction or time-limited specialist input
- Access to targeted support may depend on school-based assessment processes
- Documentation requirements vary across systems at this level

C

Specialist provision

Provision delivered outside standard mainstream classroom arrangements

- Specialist provision may include individualised programmes, separate classes, or specialist schools
- Access typically requires formal assessment and eligibility decisions
- The extent of specialist placement varies across jurisdictions

Support & workforce | Teacher expertise influences how support operates in practice

Across jurisdictions, teachers report varied preparedness to support students with SEND.

Preparation and training

- SEND is included in initial teacher education in most systems, but the depth of training varies
- Specialist roles (e.g., coordinators or specialist teachers) hold more detailed expertise than general classroom teachers
- Ongoing professional learning is often required for teachers to support diverse needs

Roles and responsibilities

- Mainstream teachers deliver most inclusive provision in practice
- Specialist staff typically advise, assess, or support rather than replace classroom teaching
- The availability of specialist expertise varies between schools and local areas

System implications

- The level of teacher preparedness influences how consistently support is delivered
- Access to specialist expertise differs across schools
- Schools may rely differently on internal adaptation or external provision

Workforce capability affects how policy design translates into classroom practice

Support coordination | SEND outcomes depend on multiple public services

Students with SEND often require support beyond education alone

Common features across jurisdictions:

- Education, health, and social care operate under separate eligibility rules
- Assessment requires input from multiple professionals
- Funding responsibilities are divided across agencies
- Services work to different threshold and incentives

Illustrative examples



England

- Education, health and social care support operate under separate eligibility rules and funding responsibilities.
- Assessment commonly requires input from multiple professionals across services.
- Government policy has aimed to improve coordination across services supporting SEND.



Finland

- Local autonomy allows services to be tailored but produces variation in how support is delivered across areas.
- Coordination with other policy areas can be more difficult where local discretion is high.
- Systems depend on collaboration between agencies for students to access support.



New Zealand

- Government policy has aimed to improve coordination across other services supporting SEND.
- Local discretion appears to drive variability in provision and can hamper coordination with other policy areas.
- Systems depend on collaboration between agencies for students to access support.




Funding | Funding is typically sourced from the central government, using a mix of census and categorical based funding

WHO PROVIDES AND DETERMINES ALLOCATION OF FUNDS?

		Who determines allocation of funds?	
		Central government	Local government ¹
Who is the main provider of SEND funding?	Local government*		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finland Japan
	Central government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ireland New Zealand Singapore 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> England Wales Northern Ireland Scotland Ontario Estonia Poland Netherlands France

The central government typically provides SEND funding, with local government allocating it

HOW IS MAINSTREAM SEND FUNDING ALLOCATED?

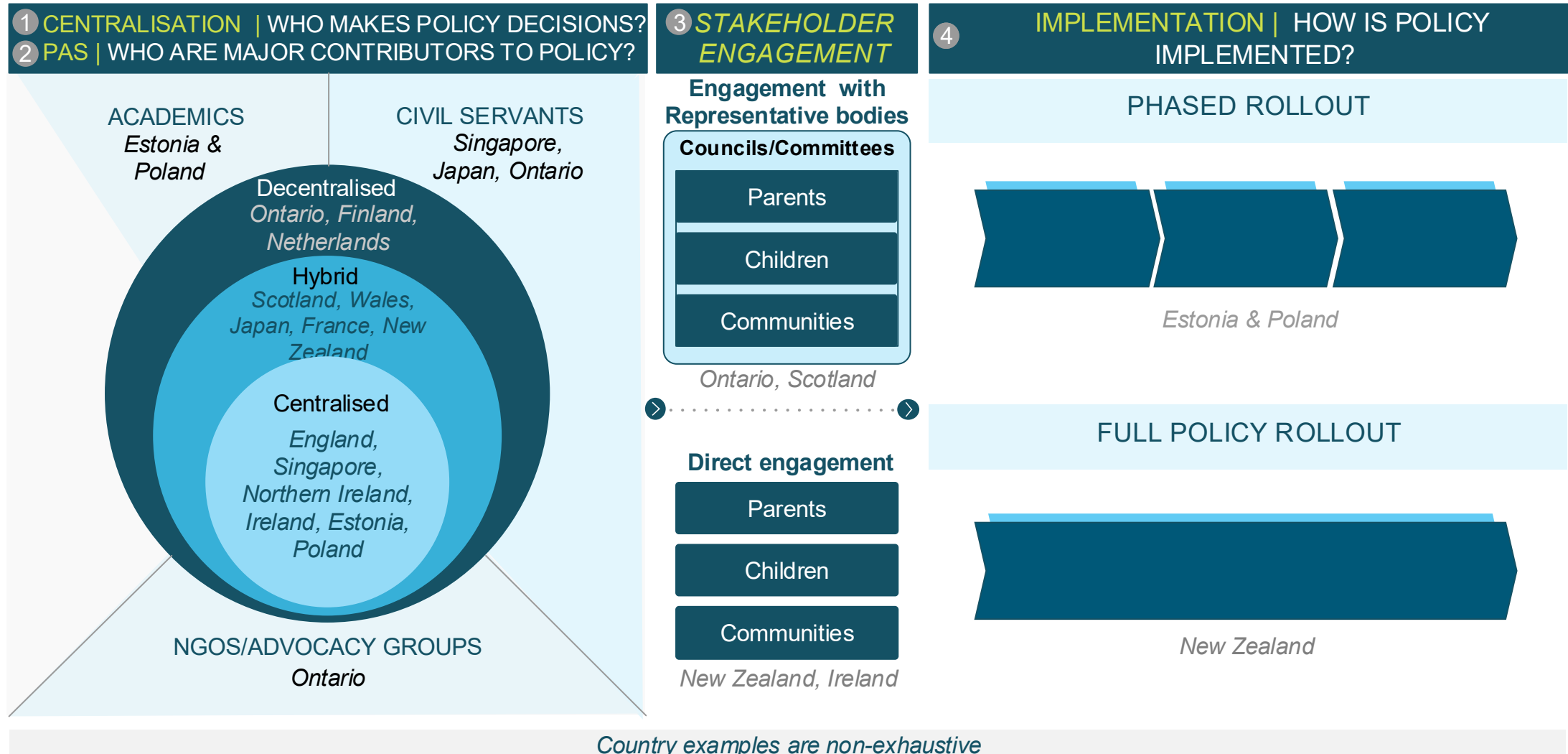
Funding types	Categorical funding:	Census-based funding:	Hybrid:
	<p>Schools receive an amount tied directly to the number of students with SEND</p>	<p>Schools receive an amount based total pupil numbers, not SEND population. Sometimes weighted by measures like deprivation indices</p>	<p>Schools use a combination of census-based funding to cover 'lower-need' SEND pupils and categorical funding for higher needs</p>
Country examples	<p><i>May exist in other systems but not captured as sole approach in the 14 jurisdictions analysed</i></p> 	<p>Scotland: Allocated using needs-based indicators (pupil numbers, deprivation, rurality measures etc.)</p> 	<p>England: Provides block grants, add'l funding is allocated per-pupil based on allocation of EHCPs²</p> 

Funding allocation is typically quite complex, involving multiple formulae and approaches (*Deep-dive on next slide*)

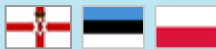










Country examples are non-exhaustive

1. Including school districts and other authorities 2. EHCP: Education, Health and Care Plan
Source: SEND Master Cross Jurisdiction tables, CES SEND Policy Report

Development | SEND reforms differ in how policy is designed and introduced



Evaluation | Systems differ in how SEND policy is reviewed

RESEARCH WHAT TYPES OF RESEARCH ARE USED TO INFORM SEND POLICY?			DELEGATION WHO CONDUCTS EVALUATIONS?		REGULARITY HOW REGULAR ARE EVALUATION PROCESSES?		OUTCOMES WHAT IS EVALUATED?			
<p>Evidence synthesis: Reviews of internal policy conducted by experts <i>Northern Ireland:</i> Northern Ireland Audit Office, NICCY and independent experts conducted reviews between 2017-2024</p> 	<p>International models and research visits: Practices in other jurisdictions are reviewed to determine potential opportunities <i>The Netherlands:</i> Inspectorate reviewed 6 European jurisdictions to inform policy</p> 	<p>Pilots/small scale research: New approaches or models are tested before or during early implementation <i>England:</i> Pilot projects were run during 2014 SEND reform, findings informed implementation</p> 	<p>Academics & External contractors: Led by researchers or an independent external body <i>Japan:</i> Cooperative councils use academics to lead reviews</p> 	<p>Devolved bodies: Led by school boards or schools through self-evaluations <i>Ontario:</i> Schools complete self-evaluations and report to MoE</p> 	<p>Government and Government-led bodies: Led by internal/civil service units (e.g., Ministries, Inspectorates) or arm's length bodies (independent government agencies, quangos¹) <i>Ireland:</i> NCSE leads Evaluations</p> 	<p>Ad-hoc: Conducted after specific initiatives, do not follow a formal schedule <i>New Zealand:</i> reviews conducted after new initiatives rolled out or when government changes</p> 	<p>Government mandated: Occurs on a fixed cycle, as determined by government but not embedded in policy design itself <i>Scotland:</i> Progress reports mandated every 18m</p> 	<p>Structured embedded: Occur on a fixed cycle which is coded as a routine policy feature <i>Finland:</i> Evaluations occur every 4 years as outlined in the National Education Evaluation Plan</p> 	<p>Student/ Professional Experience & Outcomes: Evaluations can assess inclusion, student/teacher wellbeing, academic results <i>France:</i> Evaluations assess beliefs and attitudes of stakeholders towards SEND students</p> 	<p>Process/ Implementation Evaluations assess policy governance, processes and structures <i>The Netherlands:</i> 2020 evaluation assessed system effects of the 2014 reform</p> 

Country examples are non-exhaustive

System constraints | SEND policy involves persistent trade-offs

Across jurisdictions, SEND systems must operate within practical limits while pursuing multiple aims.

Inclusion and provision	Resources and entitlement	Consistency and flexibility	Defining success
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systems promote mainstream inclusion while specialist provision continues to expand. • Families may seek specialist settings where support is perceived to be more reliable. • Reducing specialist placements can face political and stakeholder resistance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available funding is insufficient to provide intensive support to all identified students. • Systems therefore prioritise support using thresholds or staged provision. • Legal entitlement frameworks can increase demand for formal identification. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local decision-making allows support to be tailored to individual needs. • Variation across areas can lead to differences in access to provision. • National standards and local discretion operate in tension. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders prioritise different outcomes, including academic progress, wellbeing, and independence. • Improvements in one aim may not correspond to improvements in another. • No reviewed jurisdiction consistently achieves all policy aims simultaneously.