# Delays in EHCPs leave thousands of children in England waiting for crucial support



Thousands of children in England with complex needs are facing delays in receiving necessary support as councils fail to meet deadlines for issuing Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). Councils are legally required to issue EHCPs within 20 weeks of a request. However, from April to December last year, eight councils met this deadline in fewer than 5% of cases, according to data obtained by BBC News.

Families like Sarah Kilgariff's are significantly impacted by these delays. Sarah, from near Stoke-on-Trent, applied for an EHCP for her son Freddie in July after he suffered a stroke. Despite his severe needs, they are still waiting over five months past the deadline. Staffordshire County Council cited increased demand and a shortage of educational psychologists as reasons for the backlog.

Nationwide, 1.5 million pupils in England have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), with 517,000 currently on EHCPs, the highest number ever recorded. Although the government plans to increase "high-needs funding" to £10.5 billion in 2024-25, many councils are still struggling financially. In a recent report, one in ten councils indicated plans to cut SEND services to balance their budgets.

The BBC's analysis, based on Freedom of Information requests to 152 local education authorities, revealed significant regional disparities. Some councils, like Essex and Portsmouth, are completing fewer than 10% of assessments within the 20-week limit. In contrast, councils like Darlington and Blackburn completed over 80% of EHCPs on time.

Staff shortages, particularly among educational psychologists, are a critical issue. Cath Lowther, General Secretary of the Association of Educational Psychologists, noted that demand has soared while the workforce has not kept pace, leading many professionals to seek work in the private sector.

Despite these challenges, some areas show improvements. For example, Hampshire improved its timeliness from under 6% in 2019 to 73% last year, largely by hiring more staff.

Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England, described the findings as "shocking" and indicative of a crisis, emphasizing the importance of timely support for children. Meanwhile, the Local Government Association highlighted ongoing efforts by councils to meet deadlines amidst escalating demands and limited resources.