Earliest Support Pathway (ESP): FAQs for schools and other settings

Statutory status and SEND reform

Is the Earliest Support Plan (ESP) mandatory?

No. The ESP is not a statutory document. Schools can continue using their own planning documentation where appropriate. The ESP is intended to provide a shared approach and common language across services.

How does the ESP relate to the proposed Individual Support Plan (ISP)?

The ESP has been designed with the proposed national SEND reforms in mind and is intended to fulfil a similar function to the future ISP. However, as national reforms have not yet been legislated, future alignment cannot be guaranteed.

Why is the ESP being introduced now?

The ESP is part of Gloucestershire's response to the national Families First transformation programme and the move toward a more integrated, graduated approach to support for children, young people and families.

EHCPs and EHC needs assessments

Has the legal test for requesting an EHC needs assessment changed?

No. The legal threshold for requesting an EHC Needs Assessment remains unchanged.

Does a child need an ESP before an EHC needs assessment can be requested?

No. An assessment can still be requested at any point. There is no requirement for a child to have an ESP in place for a specified period first.

What evidence is needed for an EHC needs assessment request?

The focus remains on demonstrating that support has been put in place, reviewed and evaluated through the assess-plan-do-review cycle, rather than on completing specific planning documents.

Can an ESP be used alongside an EHCP?

Yes. The ESP may be used alongside an EHCP where there are shorter-term needs or outcomes that sit outside the EHCP. Concerns about duplication have been recognised and will continue to be considered.

Using the ESP for SEND

Can the ESP be used for SEND-only needs?

Yes. The ESP can be used where a child's needs are solely educational or SEND-related.

Does every section need to be completed?

No. The plan should be proportionate to the child's needs. Only relevant sections need to be completed.

Do unrelated family circumstances need to be recorded?

No. If wider family circumstances are explored and are not relevant to the child's support needs, they do not need to be recorded.

Is the ESP suitable for straightforward SEND needs, such as dyslexia or cognition and learning needs?

Yes. The ESP is intended to expand or contract according to the level of need and should be suitable for both straightforward and more complex situations. Examples will be available on the ESP webpages when the pathway launches.

One plan and whole-family working

Is there one plan per child or one plan per family?

The ESP supports a whole-family approach and can include information relating to multiple children within a family.

What if siblings have different needs?

A single plan can capture each child's different needs.

What if siblings attend different schools or settings?

Where needed, practitioners from different schools and settings are intended to contribute to the same planning and review process, as they currently do through the Graduated Pathway.

Will children have to repeat their story to different professionals?

The ESP aims to reduce duplication and support coordinated working across services, helping to minimise repeated information gathering. To support this, it has been agreed as a preferred tool for access into Family Help, EHCP and CAAAS pathways.

Lead Professional and shared ownership

Who owns the ESP?

The ESP is a shared plan involving all relevant professionals and the family.

What does the Lead Professional do?

One practitioner may coordinate the plan, organise reviews and oversee progress. However, coordination does not mean they are responsible for delivering all actions themselves.

Will schools automatically take on the Lead Professional role?

No. Schools will not automatically be expected to take on this role. Depending on family circumstances, other practitioners supporting the family may be most appropriately placed to act as Lead Professional.

Transition and implementation

Does everything change on 2 November?

No. The move to the ESP is intended to be a transition rather than an immediate switch from one system to another.

Do existing plans need to be transferred immediately?

No. Existing plans can continue and transition to the ESP at natural review points.

When should schools start using the ESP?

Schools are encouraged to become familiar with the pathway during November and December and begin adopting it through normal review processes.

Will the ESP increase workload?

The intention is to reduce duplication and simplify processes. However, concerns about workload and capacity have been recognised and will continue to inform implementation planning.

Referrals and evidence

Can the ESP be used for CAAAS referrals?

Yes. The ESP is intended to provide sufficient evidence to support CAAAS pathway referrals and reduce duplication.



Is a separate My Assessment still needed for CAS referrals?

No. The ESP replaces My Assessment, My Plan and My Plan Plus. It is intended to provide the evidence required and reduce the need for additional assessments.

Will CAAAS accept a school's own planning document instead of the GCC ESP?

Yes. The CAAAS pathway continues to accept individual schools' planning and assessment tools, as well as the ESP.

Information sharing and confidentiality

How will confidential information be protected?

Information sharing will continue to be based on consent, professional judgement and existing safeguarding requirements.

Can parents choose which agencies can access information?

Yes. Families' information-sharing preferences can be recorded, and access to sensitive information can be managed appropriately.

Can sensitive information be removed when sharing plans?

Yes. Information can be redacted where necessary to ensure confidentiality while still supporting multi-agency working.

Reviews and monitoring

How often should an ESP be reviewed?

There is no set review timetable. Reviews should be proportionate to the child's needs and circumstances.

Do schools still need to complete three reviews a year?

No universal review schedule has been prescribed. Review frequency should be based on need rather than a fixed timetable.

Digital systems and documentation

Can practitioners contribute to one plan digitally?

At present this would only be possible through systems such as SharePoint or OneDrive.

Can schools continue using their existing digital planning systems?

Yes. Schools can continue using their existing digital systems to develop and review plans. We recommend applying the Earliest Support Pathway principles to these plans. The aim is to avoid duplication, not to require schools to recreate an existing plan in a separate format.

Some schools have asked which elements of the Earliest Support Plan should be integrated into existing planning software, such as EduKEy, Insight or Tes Provision Maps. We will explore developing guidance to help schools align their current planning documents with the Earliest Support Plan templates.

Development, feedback, training and support

Who has contributed to developing the ESP?

The ESP has been developed with input from GCC SEND and Inclusion Services, the CAAAS pathway, Youth Service, Post 16 Services, Early Help, Local Offer SEND Specialists, the Parent/Carer Forum and education colleagues, including school leaders. Webinar feedback called for greater SENCO involvement. This has been acknowledged and will be taken forward during the test-and-learn period after launch.

Are the current ESP documents final?

No. The documents shared are drafts and will be refined through implementation and feedback. A six-month test-and-learn period will include active engagement with the sector to check that the ESP is working effectively for children and families.

How can schools contribute to the pathway's development?

The test-and-learn phase will build ongoing review and feedback into implementation. Schools, practitioners, parent carers, children and young people will contribute to the pathway's development.

What training and support will be available?

Short training modules are planned, and the Early Intervention and Community Team will provide support with planning, reviews and Team Around the Family processes.