

2026

Time to Act: Strengthening and Expanding Portage for Pre-school Children with SEND



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Foreword from the Chair of the National Portage Association (NPA)

Portage has, for over 50 years, provided specialist home-visiting educational support to pre-school children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families. Its evidence-based approach strengthens child development, builds parental confidence and reduces family stress at the earliest and most critical stage of life.

This document sets out a clear and practical case for strengthening and expanding Portage services nationally. The evidence is compelling: early intervention improves outcomes, reduces later demand on statutory services and delivers long-term social and economic benefits. Yet despite this, access to Portage remains inconsistent and, in many areas, fragile.

Families should not face geographical inequalities when seeking early support for their child. Nor should local authorities be left to sustain vital early intervention services without a coherent national framework or dedicated investment.

On behalf of the National Portage Association, I urge the Government to recognise Portage as an essential component of the early years SEND system and to commit to sustainable national investment. A clear national strategy, protected funding and workforce development are necessary to ensure that every child who would benefit from Portage can access it.

Investing in Portage is not simply an investment in a service — it is an investment in children's lives, family resilience and the long-term sustainability of our SEND system. The case for action is clear. The time to act is now.

Pam Fry, Chair
National Portage Association

The current SEND system rightly places increased emphasis on early identification, inclusive practice and improved outcomes, yet for many families this ambition is undermined by inconsistent access to effective early years support. Portage services provide a well-established, evidence-based model of early intervention, supporting babies and young children with additional needs within their home or nursery environment and empowering parents as their child's first and most enduring educators.

Brue and Oakland (2001) demonstrate that by promoting high-quality parent-child interactions, communication, play and learning through everyday routines, Portage delivers demonstrable benefits to children's development, parental confidence and family wellbeing. They also report consistent evidence that children receiving Portage intervention show measurable developmental gains, particularly in cognitive development, communication and language, social interaction and self-help and independence skills.

However, as Portage provision is not a statutory requirement for local authorities, access remains variable, creating regional disparities that run counter to the Government's stated commitment to equity, early support and improved life chances for children with SEND.

Making Portage a statutory service would align directly with the direction of travel set out in current SEND Reform, ensuring consistent, timely early intervention for all eligible families, reducing escalation to more intensive services and supporting smoother transitions into early education and school.

This approach would not only improve outcomes for children and families but also represent a cost-effective investment, easing long-term pressures on education, health and social care systems and strengthening the wider community through earlier, more inclusive support.

The National Portage Association provides a quality framework, and training for Portage across England and Wales, supporting Portage services, Portage Practitioners and parents/ carers. Portage services, which are usually run by Local Authorities or charities, provide an early education programme in the family home, using a small-steps approach for each child, planning play-based activities to support all areas of a child's learning and development. We believe it is essential to raise the profile of Portage and ensure it is properly valued and integrated within the wider early years and SEND support landscape. As the Government considers the next phase of implementation for the Best Start strategy, we urge the Government to formally recognise Portage as one of the core early intervention pathways for young children with SEND.



WHAT IS THE NATIONAL PORTAGE ASSOCIATION (NPA)



MISSION

Improving the learning of young children with developmental differences and disabilities, and the skills of their parents, through providing quality training and support for Portage home visitors and the early years workforce.

The National Portage Association is founded on the following values and principles

- Every child and every family should be valued for their individuality as diversity brings strength to us all.
- Parents play the key role in supporting their young child's development.
- Families have the right to make informed choices and decisions for themselves about things that are important to them now and in the future, whilst remaining the child's first ally.
- All children have the right to enjoy the widest range of play experiences, as these are the foundation of learning and development.
- Early childhood is the foundation on which children build the rest of their lives: it is not just a preparation for the next stage – it is vitally important in itself.
- Services for families are most useful when they support everyday living and are delivered within the child's natural environment.
- All children are able to learn, and the Portage model builds on abilities and strengths, rather than focusing on difficulties through the Portage model.
- Portage is available at the right time for every child that needs it

VISION

Our Vision is that every child with developmental differences has access to the best early intervention in the early years and that the government designates the Portage teaching model as a statutory early years and SEND service, supported by ring-fenced national funding to ensure sustainability and high-quality delivery in every Local Authority in England.

CORE VALUES

The NPA's work is underpinned by several foundational principles:

- Individuality: Every child and family is valued for their uniqueness.
- Inclusion: Participation in the community is a right that must be nurtured.
- Parental Partnership: Recognising parents as the key figures in their child's development.
- Small -steps Approach: Utilising a "Can Do" model that focuses on what a child can achieve rather than their difficulties.

WHAT IS PORTAGE?

Portage is an early-years support service for babies and young children (typically 0–5 years) who have developmental differences or disabilities, and for their families. It usually takes place in the family home, nursery or childminder setting.

What Portage does

A trained Portage Practitioner works in partnership with parents/carers to:

- Support a child's development (communication, movement, play, independence)
- Break skills down into small, achievable steps
- Use play-based activities tailored to each child
- Help parents feel confident supporting learning day-to-day
- Prepare children for nursery or school transition
- Coordinate with other professionals (speech therapists, physios, SEN services)

Parents are central — Portage is very much about empowering families, not “doing therapy to” a child. Brue and Oakland (2001) report that parents involved in Portage develop greater understanding of their child's developmental needs, feel more confident in supporting learning at home and become active partners, rather than passive recipients of professional support.

Portage works through a structured model delivered by Portage practitioners who work collaboratively with families using the Portage principles. Using play-based activities embedded within everyday routines, Portage practitioners support parents to promote their child's communication, physical, cognitive and social development, while modelling positive interaction and responsive caregiving.

The programme is individualised, goal-focused and reviewed regularly, enabling progress to be tracked and support to be adapted as needs evolve. Portage practitioners also play a vital role in coordinating with early years settings, health professionals and local services, supporting smooth transitions into early education and reducing the need for more intensive intervention later.

This partnership-based approach reflects best practice in early years SEND support and contributes to more effective, joined-up provision across local systems.



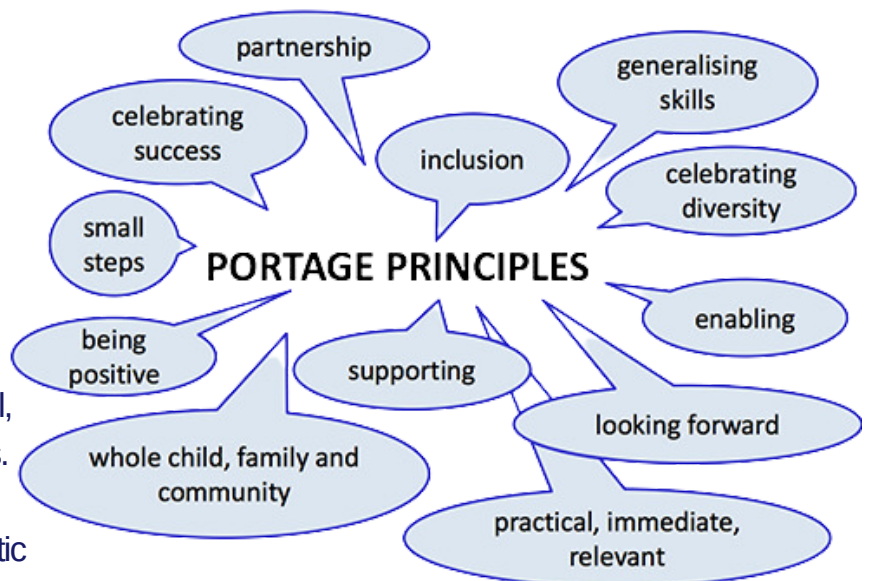
WHO CAN ACCESS PORTAGE?



Portage is an early intervention service for babies and young children, typically from birth to five years, who have special educational needs and disabilities, developmental delay, or emerging additional needs, including those not yet in receipt of a formal diagnosis. Children referred to, or supported by, Portage services commonly present with a range of complex developmental needs, including autism and social communication needs, cerebral palsy, global developmental delay, Down's syndrome, complex and/or life-limiting health conditions, and profound and multiple learning disabilities. Typically, eligibility requires delays in two or more developmental areas, usually of at least six months.

It is designed to support children at the earliest possible stage, recognising the importance of timely identification and intervention in improving long-term outcomes.

Portage also supports parents and carers, equipping them with the skills, confidence and understanding needed to meet their child's individual needs and to play an active role in their development. Borg et al (2024) demonstrated that a Portage program can achieve a significant improvement regarding the stress for parents and their children with ASD and family awareness concerning the autistic child as well as improvements in social, language, self-help, cognitive, and motor skills. This inclusive approach ensures that families are not excluded from support due to diagnostic thresholds, aligning with the Government's commitment to early help and preventative services.



PORTAGE IMPACT



The Impact of Portage on Early Childhood Development

- Promotes Critical Early Development - Portage delivers structured, play-based learning that supports communication, social development, early cognition, emotional regulation, and physical skills. Its small-step developmental model ensures measurable and meaningful progress.
- Prevents Escalation of Need- Early intervention leads to improved developmental trajectories and reduces reliance on more intensive services later. This supports the Family First agenda and the SEND system's aim for earlier, more effective help.
- (Brue and Oakland, 2001) present evidence that early Portage intervention can: Reduce the severity of later learning difficulties, improve school readiness, lower the need for intensive specialist support at later stages
- Longitudinal findings indicate that children who received Portage support were more likely to access mainstream early years provision successfully compared with peers who did not receive early intervention
- For infants born prematurely, David Lansing Cameron (2021), found that a structured, home-based Portage intervention improved developmental outcomes compared to children who did not receive the programme.

Impact on Family Support and Parental Wellbeing

- Strengthens Families Before Crisis Occurs - Portage provides early practical and emotional support, perfectly complementing the Family First mission to intervene early and strengthen family resilience.
- Improves Navigation of SEND Pathways - Portage Practitioners help families understand processes, explore entitlements, and access appropriate services—directly supporting the goals of the upcoming SEND Reform, which seek simpler, more consistent systems and improved parental confidence.
- Enhances Family Relationships and Emotional Wellbeing - Through a strength-based, partnership approach, Portage nurtures positive family interaction and supports parental mental health—key elements of the Best Start in Life vision.

Impact on Parental Self-Efficacy

- Builds Confidence Through Coaching - Portage empowers parents & carers with real-time, in-home strategies that equip them to support their child's development effectively and confidently.
- Promotes Collaboration and Shared Decision-Making - Parents are active partners throughout the process, supporting national objectives for co-production, parental empowerment, and family-centred early years practice.
- Creates Sustainable, Long-Term Skills - Families consistently report that the techniques and understanding gained through Portage continue to benefit them long after their involvement ends.

PORTAGE SERVICES: NATIONAL SNAPSHOT (2024/25)

Key facts on coverage, funding, demand, and early intervention delivery.

COVERAGE		
<p>32% of Local Authorities invest in a Portage service</p>	<p>101 Portage services registered with the NPA</p>	<p>100% of Portage services hold a waiting list</p>

FUNDING & PRESSURE ON SERVICES		
<p>97% of Portage services are funded by Local Authorities</p>	<p>3% are independent or have charity status</p>	<p>10% have received a budget cut in the last 12 months</p>

DEMAND		
<p>63% of services have seen a significant increase in referrals in the last 12 months</p>	<p>14,000 referrals accepted nationally in 2024/25</p>	<p>13,204 children received a Portage Intervention in 2024/25</p>

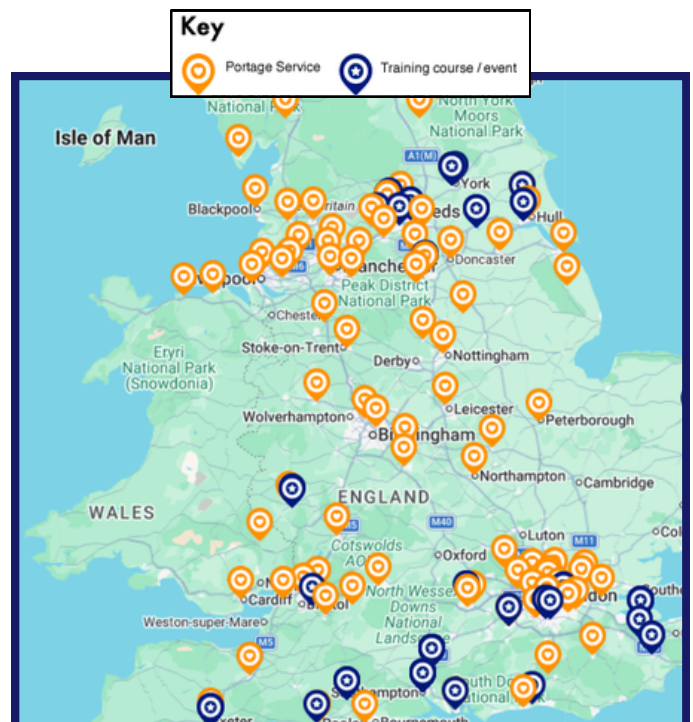
AGE RANGE SUPPORTED		
<p>25% of services support children aged 0–3 years</p>	<p>25% of services support children aged 0 - 4 years</p>	<p>50% of services support children aged 0 - 5 years</p>

Key message: Portage services deliver nationally regulated early intervention at scale, under increasing demand and financial pressure, with universal waiting lists.

The current picture:

There are currently 101 Registered Portage services in England out of a potential 317 Local Authorities. 10 years ago there were 115 services Registered with the National Portage Association however due to significant budget cuts and reduced funding, services are being cut due to lack of priority funding.

Significant geographical gaps in East and West England, South Central England and South East England



The map shows where Portage services are based

The Cost of Portage

PORTAGE SERVICES: COSTS & CAPACITY (ENGLAND)

Indicative costs for delivering a Portage offer and a hands-on intervention.

AVERAGE ANNUAL COST PER SERVICE

£240k–£270k

Estimated average cost of a hands-on Portage service in England.

Term-time only: 39-week offer.

WHAT THIS FUNDS

£2,400

At an estimated £2,400 per child per year, Portage represents a fraction of the cost of:

- An EHCP assessment
- Specialist Provision
- Tribunal Process
- Long-term social care involvement

4.5 FTE

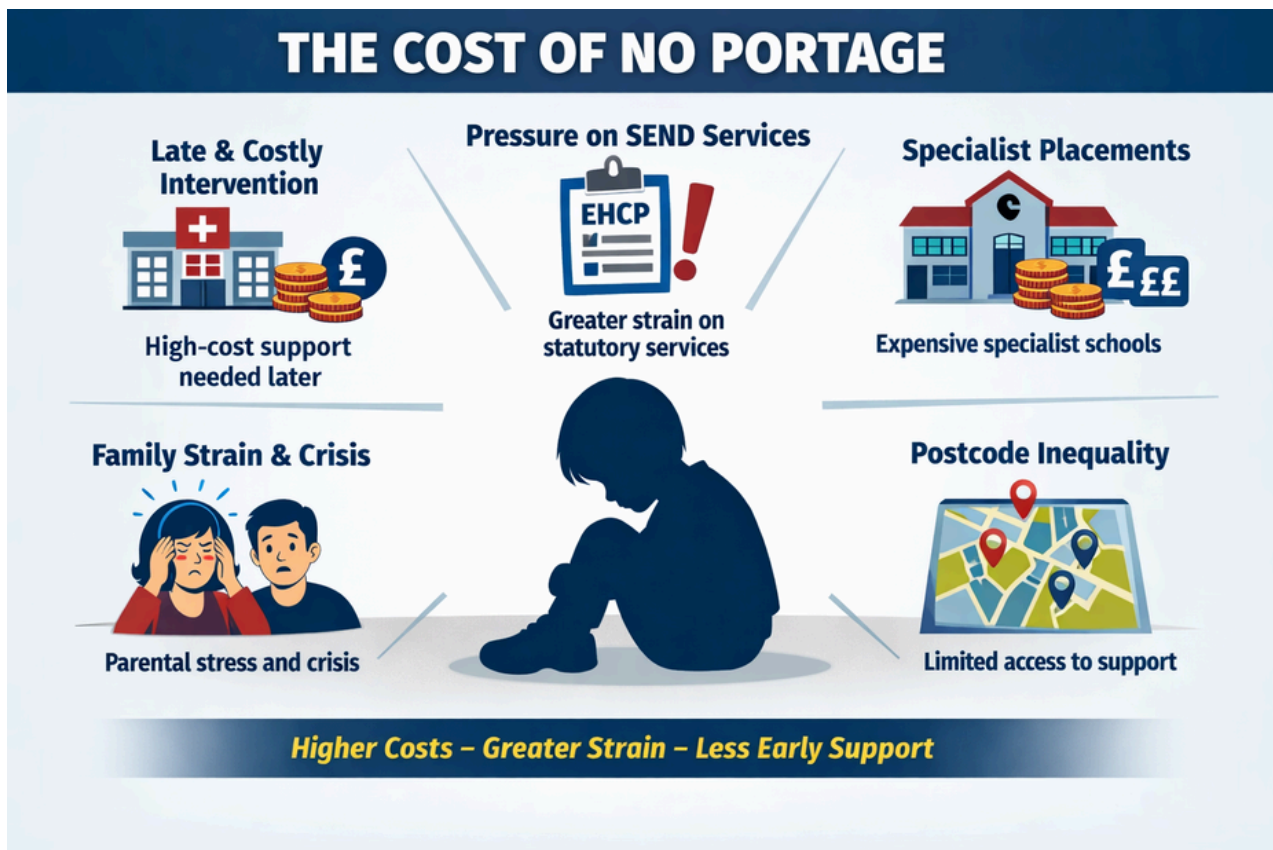
Average team size

(Varies depending on geographical area)

Key message: Portage delivers specialist early intervention through small teams, with a clear and measurable cost per child for practical delivery.



THE TRUE COST OF NO PORTAGE OR A REDUCED OFFER



There is no single budget line called “No Portage”. The cost is a predictable shift from early, preventative support to later, higher-cost statutory response.

1) Later, more expensive intervention

Needs escalate before being identified. Low-cost early help is replaced by higher-cost specialist input.

2) Increased pressure on statutory SEND services

Higher demand for Educational Psychology, specialist health input, and SEND inclusion funding.

3) Higher likelihood of EHCPs

More children enter statutory assessment later, with long-term cost implications for Local Authorities.

4) Increased spend on specialist placements

Escalation increases the likelihood of specialist provision, including independent placements.

5) Greater pressure on families

Families navigate systems alone, increasing stress, risk of family breakdown and poor parental mental health - raising demand on health and social care.

6) Increased geographical inequalities

Reduced early access widens developmental gaps before school and increases long-term inequality.

Key message for leaders & budget holders:

The cost of no Portage is not a saving — it is a cost-shift. Expenditure moves from early, preventative intervention to later, more expensive statutory services.

POLICY

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Portage's non-statutory status currently creates:

- Geographical inequalities
- Workforce instability
- Inconsistent quality and access
- Vulnerability to local funding cuts
- Gaps in early intervention at a time of rising need



These challenges contradict the ambitions outlined for the SEND system in the forthcoming Schools White Paper, which aims for:

- Earlier identification
- Consistent national standards
- Equitable access
- Reduced pressures on families and services

Policy Recommendations:

1. Make Portage a statutory early years SEND service.
2. Introduce ring-fenced national funding.
3. Establish national minimum coverage standards.
4. Protect workforce capacity through funded training pathways.
5. Embed Portage within SEND Reform implementation guidance

Investment in Portage services represents not only a commitment to children and their families, but also to the Portage workforce. The National Portage Association (NPA) provides a robust framework for quality assurance through its core competencies, service registration, and monitoring systems, ensuring consistent standards of delivery across England. Children's developmental progress is measured using nationally recognised assessment documentation, supporting effective planning and accountability.

In addition, the NPA maintains a comprehensive quality training framework, supporting both England-based and international Portage provision. This includes structured training pathways, ongoing professional development opportunities, and a programme of Developmental Days, conferences, and regional meetings. The NPA Code of Practice further underpins this approach by ensuring a high standard of support through regular supervision, professional guidance, and reflective practice.



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