In Practice: Policy Guide

Ambitious about Autism

Contents

Principle 1: Include autistic young people in decision making 4

Ambitious about Autism's principle 4
What the Government is proposing 5
What we learned from autistic young people 6

Case study: Digital Stories 10

Principle 2: Measure success through autistic young people's experiences 12

Ambitious about Autism's principle 12
What the Government is proposing 12
What we learned from autistic young people 14

The hidden impact of a poor placement 17

Principle 3: Set clear expectations for inclusion 18

Ambitious about Autism's principle 18
What the Government is proposing 18
What we learned from autistic young people 21

What are autistic young people and their families saying? 22

Principle 4: Building a system young people can trust 23

Ambitious about Autism's principle 23
What the Government is proposing? 23

Case study: Integrated Plans at TreeHouse School 27

Case study: SPP case studies 28

What we learned from autistic young people 32

What are autistic young people and their families saying? 34

Principle 5: Invest in the change you want to see 37

Ambitious about Autism's principle 37
What the Government is proposing 37

What are autistic young people and their families saying? 40

What we learned from autistic young people 41

What are autistic young people and their families saying? 43

Key proposals in detail 46

SEND Code of Practice 46
National Inclusion Standards 48
Reasonable Adjustments Guidance 48
School Inclusion Strategy 49
Attendance strategy 50
Attainment Strategy 50
Behaviour Strategy 51
Curriculum and Assessment 52
Needs Assessments 53
Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) 55
Individual Support Plans (ISPs) 56
Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs) 58
Choice of setting 60
SEND Tribunal 61
Inclusive Mainstream Fund (IMF) 63
National Funding Formula (NFF) 64
Local SEND Inclusion Formula 65
High needs capital funding 66
Inclusive Education Estates 68
Inclusion Bases 69
National SEND Training Programme 71
Experts at Hand 74
The specialist sector 76
Transitioning to a new system 78
The wider system 78

Principle 1: Include autistic young people in decision making

WHO SHAPES THE SYSTEM?

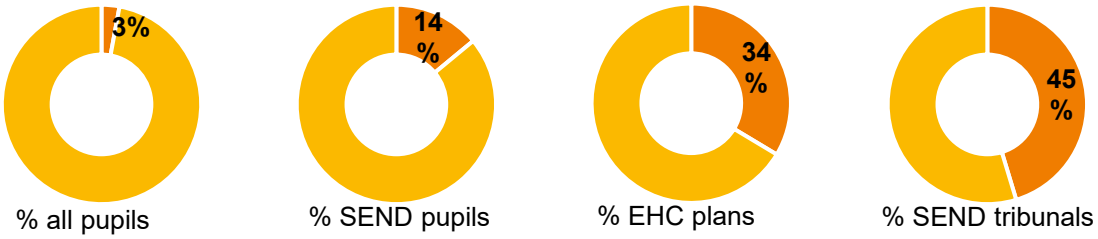
Ambitious about Autism's principle

At Ambitious about Autism, we believe the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system will only succeed if it is shaped with autistic children and young people, not simply for them.

Autistic voices must influence decisions at every level, from national policy and guidance to the everyday decisions made in schools and colleges. Lived experience is expertise. Alongside research and professional knowledge, it leads to better decisions, better support and reforms that work in practice[1], not just on paper.

This must include autistic children and young people specifically. Autistic children and young people account for more than one third of all Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), making them one of the largest groups of children relying on statutory SEND support (see figure below). They also experience some of the poorest educational outcomes across the system (see Chapter 2). If SEND reform does not work for autistic children and young people, it cannot be considered a success.

A one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion risks overlooking the barriers autistic children and young people face every day. True inclusion is not about designing one system that everyone must fit into. It is about designing a system that can respond to different children with different needs.



[1] Currie, G., Gorin, S., Smith, P., Grindle, C., and Hastings, R. (2024). Inclusion of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in schools – how can local areas support schools? A report commissioned by the Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) partnership on behalf of the Department for Education.

What the Government is proposing

The Government's White Paper, Every child achieving and thriving[2], sets out plans for a more inclusive education system. It aims to help more children move from being sidelined to being included, and from withdrawing to taking part.

It also recognises that young people have ambitions for their own futures and that adults can sometimes limit them. Young people told the Government that they want their voices to be "at the heart of decision making".

To support this ambition, the Government has committed to a new Pupil Engagement Framework to help schools and colleges understand students' experiences of belonging, inclusion, safety and relationships. It has also committed to involving children and young people in shaping SEND policy and delivery.

However, it remains unclear how autistic children and young people will be involved in practice or what ongoing role they will play in shaping these reforms. They are not currently represented on the Expert Panel developing the National Inclusion Standards and Specialist Provision Packages, and the only formal engagement announced to support this work is a parental engagement group.

These commitments reveal an important gap. The reforms recognise the importance of listening to children and young people and understanding their experiences. However, they stop short of seeing children and young people as active partners in designing, delivering and improving the system.

The White Paper argues that it is too often adults who limit children's ambitions. That same principle should shape how the Government approaches SEND reform. If children's voices are to be "at the heart of decision making", autistic children and young people should be embedded throughout the reform process.

This means investing in meaningful, accessible and ongoing engagement, and creating formal opportunities for autistic young people's lived experience to shape Government work

[2] Department for Education (2026), Every Child Achieving and Thriving

What we learned from autistic young people

Throughout this project, autistic young people demonstrated that lived experience is more than personal testimony. It is a source of policy insight.

While exploring many of the major Government proposals, young people identified gaps, anticipated implementation challenges and developed practical recommendations.

Young people described the same vision for meaningful participation, where they are not simply consulted after reforms had been designed, but help shape them from the beginning, contribute to how they are delivered, evaluate whether they are working in practice and continue improving them over time. The following guidance reflects how autistic young people see meaningful co-production and why

Autistic young people's guidance for meaningful co-production

Understand that lived experience improves policy

How can autistic lived experience improve policy?

The Government has rightly committed to developing evidence-based reforms, drawing on research, professional expertise and implementation evidence. Our workshops demonstrated that lived experience is another essential form of evidence. Autistic young people experience education every day and can identify barriers, assumptions and unintended consequences that are difficult to see through research, professional expertise or system data alone.

Across every proposal discussed, young people identified assumptions that did not reflect everyday experiences, anticipated unintended consequences and suggested changes that would make reforms more effective in practice. They repeatedly identified issues before implementation had even begun, giving the Government the opportunity to strengthen proposals before implementation begins.

For example, when reviewing the draft Specialist Provision Packages, participants questioned why categories focused on visible behaviour rather than underlying need. They challenged terminology that did not reflect autistic experiences, identified gaps around executive functioning and suggested

practical improvements before the proposals were implemented.

Recognising lived experience as expertise is therefore not simply about participation. It leads to better policy. Involving autistic young people throughout policy development helps identify and resolve problems before reforms are implemented, reducing the need for redesign, improving consistency and increasing the likelihood that support will work as intended from the outset.

For it to be meaningful, it must happen before decisions have been made. It should happen early enough to influence policy, involve autistic young people with a wide range of experiences and communication preferences, and remain open to adapting proposals when lived experience identifies better solutions or highlights potential problems.

Moreover, this should not mark the end of participation, but only the beginning. Young people wanted autistic children and young people to continue reviewing policy as evidence, practice and lived experience evolve.

For them, meaningful co-production is not a consultation exercise or a single stage of policymaking. It is an ongoing partnership that strengthens policy, improves implementation and enables the SEND system to keep learning and improving.

Young people also believed this principle should extend beyond policy design into implementation itself. They spoke of how many misconceptions persist because professionals rarely have opportunities to learn directly from autistic people about their everyday experiences of education. They wanted lived experience embedded throughout the National Training Programme to challenge assumptions, build empathy and connect professional learning with real-world experience. Some pointed to the Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training model as an example of how autistic people can successfully co-deliver national training. They felt the National Training Programme should adopt the same principle, recognising autistic young people not only as learners, but also as educators, leaders and role models.

Understand that personalised support depends on partnership

How can we ensure support is genuinely personalised?

Young people consistently argued that autistic people should not simply be the subject of reform. They should be active partners in delivering it.

One of the clearest messages from autistic young people was that SEND reform will only succeed if it moves away from categorisation and one-size-fits-all approaches towards genuinely personalised support. For

participants, personalised support meant recognising that no two autistic children and young people experience education in the same way. Schools and colleges should adapt to the student, rather than expecting the student to adapt to the them.

Young people were equally clear that this level of personalisation is only possible when autistic children and young people are active partners in understanding their own support. Knowing that someone is autistic is only the starting point. Effective support comes from understanding how autism affects that individual. While parents, teachers and professionals all play a vital role, they cannot replace the child's own perspective.

Importantly, young people recognised that meaningful partnership does not mean expecting children to know exactly what support they need. Many explained that they may not know what is possible until adults discuss different options, explain what support could look like and help them reflect on what works best. Genuine co-production therefore combines professional expertise with the child's own understanding of their experiences, enabling decisions to be made together rather than by either party alone.

This principle ran throughout every area of SEND reform. Young people argued that needs assessments should begin by building a complete picture of the individual through direct conversations with the child. They wanted National Inclusion Standards to require schools and colleges to personalise support and review it regularly with students. They argued that Individual Support Plans (ISPs) should be developed collaboratively with children and families and evolve as needs change. They wanted the National Training Programme to equip professionals to understand the individual behind the diagnosis and build trusting relationships with students. They also described Inclusion Bases that adapt to changing needs and give young people meaningful influence over when and how support is accessed.

Across every proposal, the message was the same: personalised support is only possible when autistic children and young people are genuine partners in decisions about their own education.

Understand that long-term success depends on shared ownership

How can we build trust in this work?

A third message emerged consistently across the workshops. Young people wanted more than consultation and more than personalised support. They wanted genuine agency over the support they receive.

For participants, successful support is not something that is designed for children and young people and delivered to them. It is something they understand, influence and help shape throughout their education.

Across discussions on needs assessments, ISPs and Inclusion Bases, participants consistently returned to the importance of choice, trust and shared decision-making. They wanted to understand why decisions were being made, feel believed when describing their experiences, and have meaningful influence over how support is provided. This was particularly clear in discussions about Inclusion Bases. Young people repeatedly emphasised that support should never be imposed, used as a behaviour-management tool or become a place students are sent without their agreement. Instead, they described support that adapts to the individual, gives students meaningful choice over when and how they access it, and is regularly reviewed with them as their needs and preferences change.

Young people were not asking professionals to step back from decision-making. Instead, they described a partnership in which professional expertise and lived experience complement one another. Professionals bring knowledge of evidence, teaching and support; autistic children and young people bring expertise about how those approaches affect them in practice. Decisions made together are more likely to reflect the individual, build trust and result in support that children and young people are willing to engage with.

Without this shared ownership, even well-designed reforms risk becoming something that is done *to* autistic children and young people rather than *with* them. That undermines trust, reduces confidence and makes meaningful implementation less likely. Long-term success therefore depends not only on designing the right reforms, but on ensuring autistic children and young people understand them, help shape them and have confidence that the system is working alongside them, rather than simply making decisions on their behalf.

Case study: Digital Stories

One of the challenges in involving autistic young people in decisions that affect them is ensuring that participation is genuinely accessible to everyone.

Traditional consultation methods often rely on spoken or written communication, which can unintentionally exclude young people who communicate in different ways. If autistic young people's voices are to shape education, organisations must be prepared to adapt how they listen.

At St John's College, Ambitious about Autism's specialist further education college in Brighton for autistic young people aged 16–25, staff have been piloting an innovative approach to learner voice through Digital Stories. The project explores new ways to include learners' views and experiences in Support Plans and other key documentation through short, personalised videos.

Drawing on the evidence-based Digital Stories methodology developed by researchers at the University of Southampton3, the approach is designed to capture the views of learners who communicate in ways other than, or alongside, spoken and written language, including through actions, vocalisations, objects, spaces, touch, and symbols. The first Digital Stories have now been completed and will be rolled out across the college from the next academic year.

Building a picture of what matters

The pilot aims to build a richer understanding of each learner by focusing on what matters most to them: their interests, strengths, capabilities, perspectives, preferences, and the support that helps them engage and feel happy and relaxed.

Before filming began, staff who knew each learner well completed a strengths-based mapping exercise, involving the learner wherever possible. This guided the filming and helped ensure that each Digital Story reflected the learner's unique experiences and personality. The mapping focused on seven areas of the learner's life:

- the spaces they like to be or explore, and what they do in those spaces
- the people they interact with and how, and who they like to spend time with
- the choices they make for themselves, and what enables them to express their independence and autonomy
- their real interests and what they really like doing
- the ways the learner communicates and expresses themselves

[3] https://autismtransitions.org

- the support the learner needs, where and how, including any strategies or known to be effective in enabling participation and progress, and why
- the learner's skills and capabilities, and what they are good at

Authentic representation

Digital Stories are created by filming learners taking part in sessions and activities they enjoy in their college and residential settings. Learners are not asked to do anything different from engaging in their normal everyday routines. Moreover, while the original Digital Stories methodology often uses first-person "I am..." statements, St John's only uses first-person narration where those exact words have been communicated directly by the learner through speech, writing or assistive technology.

This helps ensure that the stories authentically reflect each learner's own experiences and communication, giving staff and professionals a trusted understanding of what matters most to the learner.

Consent and assent

Before filming begins, while parents or carers provide formal consent, learners themselves are asked for their agreement on every filming occasion. Staff received training on the important distinction between consent and assent to be able to carry this forward responsibly.

For some learners, assent may be communicated directly through speech, signs or assistive technology. For others, it may be expressed through body language, facial expressions, gestures, vocalisations or other observable behaviours. Staff work with each learner to identify their individual communication preferences and personalised indicators of when they are comfortable, engaged and happy to participate, as well as indicators of when they are not.

Assent is treated as an ongoing process. Learners may choose to participate on one occasion but not another, and staff continually check for signs that a learner is comfortable and wishes to continue. If a learner indicates that they do not wish to participate, filming does not begin or is stopped immediately.

Looking ahead

As St John's begins rolling out Digital Stories across the college, the pilot offers a practical example of how settings can make participation more accessible for autistic young people with a wide range of communication styles.

It shows that meaningful participation is not about asking every young person the same questions in the same way. It is about adapting participation so that every learner has the opportunity to express what matters to them and ensuring those views can inform the decisions that affect their education and support.

Principle 2: Measure success through autistic young people's experiences

WHAT SHOULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Ambitious about Autism's principle

At Ambitious about Autism, any SEND system should begin and end with one simple question: is it improving children's lives? For us, that question must always include autistic children and young people.

An effective SEND system is not defined by where children are educated, how support is organised or how much provision costs. It is defined by whether autistic children and young people are safe, belong, are learning, are supported to thrive and are prepared for adulthood. Every policy, investment and reform should ultimately be judged by whether it improves those outcomes.

To answer that question, we need to understand autistic children's experiences. We believe that what we measure shapes what we improve.

SEND reform will only succeed if it is relentless about outcomes and rigorous about evidence. That means measuring the experiences that matter most to autistic children and young people, using that information to understand what works, and being prepared to change course when reforms are not delivering the improvements intended. The challenge is therefore not simply to collect more data, but to use it to make better decisions. If SEND reform does not improve outcomes for autistic children and young people, it cannot be considered a success.

What the Government is proposing

The Government's White Paper, Every child achieving and thriving[4], changes how it describes success. Its aim is to help children move from being sidelined to being included, and from withdrawing to taking part. It recognises that children who feel safe, connected and valued are more likely to attend, take part in learning, build positive relationships and achieve good outcomes.

[4] Department for Education (2026), Every Child Achieving and Thriving.

To support this ambition, the reforms place much greater emphasis on outcomes, evidence and continuous improvement. They propose new ways of understanding students' experiences through the Pupil Engagement Framework, improving identification of SEND, developing evidence-informed National Inclusion Standards, spreading effective practice through the Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) programme, strengthening the international evidence base through the proposed International SEND Alliance[5], and adopting a "test, learn and grow" approach to implementation.

These developments are welcome. They reflect a growing body of evidence[6,7,8,9,10] showing that belonging, safety, engagement and positive relationships are not simply desirable outcomes in themselves. They are among the strongest predictors of children's learning, wellbeing, attendance and long-term success.

Alongside the White Paper, updated Department for Education guidance on suspensions and exclusions[11] proposes a stronger approach to monitoring how students move through the education system. This includes a new national dashboard tracking movements into Alternative Provision, managed moves, Inclusion Bases, off-site direction, returns to mainstream and exits from schools and colleges. Combined with an annual review, this aims to identify unusual patterns and support earlier intervention.

Together, this work creates an important opportunity to better understand children's experiences, identify barriers before they become visible through attendance, behaviour or attainment, and use this evidence to improve children's lives. However, their success will depend on whether they capture the outcomes that matter most to autistic children and young people and use that evidence to drive meaningful improvement.

[5] Department for Education (18 May 2026) New international alliance to support children with SEND. GOV.UK. Published 18 May 2026.

[6] National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (2026). Invisible progress: Capturing what really changes for SEND learners.

[7] Special Educational Needs Policy Research Forum **(2026).** *Beyond metrics: Why relationships matter more than results in education*.

[8] Impacted Group (2026). Mind the Engagement Gap: A National Study of Pupils Engagement in England's Schools.

[9] Department of Education, University of Oxford (2026). Statement on the importance of belonging in education.

[10] Evidence Based Education (2026). Belonging: The Hidden Foundation of Wellbeing and Learning.

[11] Department for Education (Last updated 26 July 2026). Schools Suspensions and permanent exclusions.

What we learned from autistic young people

Throughout every workshop, autistic young people repeatedly returned to one question: how will the Government know whether these reforms are improving our lives?

They welcomed the White Paper's greater focus on outcomes and evidence, but consistently challenged how success would be measured, whose experiences would be reflected, and how that evidence would be used to improve the reforms over time.

Young people consistently argued that the success of SEND reform should be judged by autistic children and young people' experiences, not simply by whether reforms have been implemented or whether training and strategies are in place. They wanted Government and schools and colleges to ask whether autistic children and young people feel safe, understood, supported and able to belong. For them, these experiences are among the most important indicators of whether SEND reform is succeeding.

Taken together, their reflections suggest that an evidence-led SEND system should meet three tests. First, it should demonstrate whether outcomes are improving specifically for autistic children and young people. Second, it should measure the experiences that matter most, not simply those that are easiest to count. Finally, it should use that evidence to learn, adapt and continually improve over time.

Test 1: Collect the right evidence

Who are we measuring?

Across every workshop, autistic young people challenged one-size-fits-all approaches. They consistently argued that autistic children cannot be understood simply as part of a broader SEND population. Understanding autism is an essential first step towards understanding the individual, recognising that autistic children and young people have distinct strengths and experiences, and face barriers that should be understood.

This means that, if the Government wants SEND reform to be genuinely evidence led, it needs evidence that is detailed enough to understand how different groups of children experience the education system. While the White Paper introduces broader measures of educational outcomes, most proposed measures continue to relate to children with SEND as a single group, if at all.

Although this provides an important picture of the system overall, it is not sufficient to understand whether

reforms are working. Improvements across the wider SEND system could mask worsening outcomes for autistic children and young people, just as genuine improvements for autistic children and young people could disappear within wider trends affecting other groups. Without autism-specific outcome measures, the Government cannot know whether reforms are improving the lives of autistic children and young people or simply changing the average across a highly diverse population.

Ultimately, this is not simply about collecting more autism data. It is about using evidence well. Good evidence should help the Government understand where barriers remain, identify which approaches are improving outcomes, and target improvement where it is needed most. If SEND reform is to be truly evidence led, the Government must be able to answer one simple question: are outcomes improving for autistic children and young people?

Test 2: Ask the right questions

What are we trying to learn?

Throughout the workshops, autistic young people challenged us to think differently about how success should be measured. Collecting more indicators will not improve children's lives unless they capture the experiences that matter most. Evidence should begin with the questions the Government needs to answer, not simply the data that is easiest to collect.

The proposed Pupil Engagement Framework is an important step forward. It recognises that children's experiences of belonging, safety, relationships and inclusion should help shape how schools and colleges understand success. However, it remains unclear how the Framework is being developed, whose experiences are shaping it, and whether it will evolve as new evidence emerges. If it is to become a meaningful tool for improving SEND, it should be co-produced with autistic children and young people and designed to answer the questions the Government most needs to answer, not simply those that are easiest to measure.

Similarly, we welcome the proposed national dashboard tracking student movement. However, it is largely designed to show what happens, rather than helping the Government understand why those patterns occur or the consequences of it.

Throughout the workshops, autistic young people repeatedly described aspects of life in education that remain largely invisible within national datasets. They spoke about lost learning, masking, internal isolation, unmet support needs, anxiety, poor mental health and the exhausting effort of coping in environments that appear successful on paper but do not feel inclusive in practice. Many of these experiences are not reflected in

attendance, attainment or behaviour data, yet they fundamentally shape children's ability to learn, participate and thrive.

Ultimately, measuring what matters is not about creating longer lists of indicators. It is about giving the Government the evidence it needs to understand why autistic children experience the education system as they do, what helps them thrive, where barriers remain and what needs to change.

Test 3: Make the right decisions

How do we use what we have learned?

Throughout this project, autistic young people consistently welcomed the Government's ambition to improve mainstream education. Their concern was not with the direction of travel, but with whether the Government was using evidence to make the right decisions at the right time. They questioned whether the reforms were being sequenced in a way that could realistically deliver the outcomes intended.

Many of the most significant elements of the reforms – including the National Inclusion Standards, ISPs, Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs), new needs assessments and Inclusion Base guidance – area still being developed. At the same time, the reforms propose significant changes to the statutory SEND system. Young people questioned how the Government could be confident these new approaches would consistently deliver better outcomes before they had been fully designed, tested and independently evaluated.

The White Paper repeatedly promotes a philosophy of **"test, learn and grow"**, careful implementation and continuous improvement. We strongly support this approach. However, it should apply not only to schools and colleges, but to the reform programme itself. Evidence should not simply monitor implementation once reforms are underway. It should shape decisions throughout the reform process: informing how reforms are designed, when they are expanded and whether they are ready to replace existing arrangements. New approaches should therefore be piloted, independently evaluated and refined before becoming the basis for significant changes to children's rights and entitlements.

Young people consistently argued that refining reforms in light of new evidence should be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. The success of an evidence-led system depends not on getting every decision right first time, but on being willing to test, learn and improve as new evidence emerges.

This is also essential to rebuilding trust. Many autistic children, young people and families have experienced years of reforms, changing priorities and inconsistent support, often without

seeing the improvements promised. Rebuilding confidence will require more than ambitious commitments. It will require the Government to demonstrate transparently that reforms are improving autistic children's lives, publish what it is learning and explain how that learning is shaping future decisions.

Ultimately, evidence should do more than accompany SEND reform. It should drive how reforms evolve, ensuring they continue to improve outcomes for autistic children and young people over time.

The hidden impact of a poor placement

A poor placement rarely results in just one problem. For many autistic children and young people, it leads to a cycle of anxiety, disengagement and lost learning that is only partly visible in national statistics.

Our 2024 **Lost Learning** survey found:

- **71%** of autistic children and young people experienced at least one form of lost learning in mainstream education.
- **66%** experienced **two or more** forms of lost learning, while **25%** experienced **four or more**.
- The most common experiences were:
    - **38%** were placed on a part-time timetable.
    - **35%** were persistently absent.
    - **29%** were severely absent.
    - **26%** experienced internal isolation.

Lost learning is rarely a choice. Only **4%** of families said it happened because their child simply refused to attend school. Instead, families described children being pushed out of education by:

- anxiety and poor mental health – **77%**
- school and college environments that did not meet their needs – **73%**
- negative experiences with staff – **61%**.

Almost **1 in 5 (18%)** said stepping away from school had become the best option for their child's mental health. **32%** of families said they felt pressured by schools into decisions such as reduced timetables or leaving school altogether.

The message is clear: many of the experiences that shape autistic children's education remain invisible in national data, despite having a profound impact on learning, wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

Principle 3: Set clear expectations for inclusion

WHAT SHOULD EVERY SCHOOL AND COLLEGE PROVIDE?

Ambitious about Autism's principle

At Ambitious about Autism, we believe an inclusive education system works when everyone responsible for education shares a common understanding that autistic children and young people belong in every classroom, and that excellence and inclusion are inseparable.

Too often, autistic children and young people are expected to adapt to education systems that were not designed with them in mind. When schools and colleges fail to recognise different ways of learning, communicating and participating, it is too often the child who is expected to change, rather than the barriers around them. True inclusion means designing education systems that are flexible enough to accommodate the diversity of learners from the outset, rather than relying on individual adjustments to make inflexible systems work. It also means recognising that there may be different, equally valid ways for children and young people to participate, learn, communicate and thrive, rather than assuming there is only one route to success.

We welcome the Government's aim to build a more inclusive education system. But individual reforms will not be enough. Inclusion must shape every part of education, including the curriculum, teaching, assessment, behaviour, attendance and accountability. Schools and colleges and local authorities can only put inclusion at the heart of their decisions if the wider education system does the same. The Government therefore needs to apply the same principle across its own policies, guidance and reforms. Inclusion must become the organising principle of the education system, inside and outside the Government.

What the Government is proposing

Across the white paper, Every child achieving and thriving[12], and the consultation, SEND Reform: putting children and young people

[12] Department for Education (2026). Every Child Achieving and Thriving. (Accessed 25 July 2026).

first[13], the Government sets out a vision for a more inclusive mainstream education system in which more children and young people with SEND can belong, learn, participate and thrive alongside their peers. Taken together, the proposals aim to move the education system from reacting to individual need towards being more inclusive by design.

To support this ambition, the Government proposes to strengthen the Universal Offer – the support, expertise and inclusive practice that mainstream schools and colleges should provide for children and young people with SEND. This includes National Inclusion Standards, a revised SEND Code of Practice, updated reasonable adjustments guidance, whole-school Inclusion Strategies and supporting implementation resources to establish clearer expectations for inclusive practice. Alongside this, the White Paper also introduces wider reforms to attendance, behaviour, attainment and the curriculum that are intended to improve outcomes for all students. Some key considerations:

Strengthening support, rather than rethinking systems

Taken together, these proposals reflect a clear vision for inclusion. The White Paper recognises that many autistic children and young people encounter practical barriers that make mainstream education difficult to access. Its response is to strengthen the Universal Offer so that schools and colleges have greater expertise, clearer expectations and better support to identify needs, make reasonable adjustments and remove barriers to participation.

The underlying assumption is that, once these barriers are addressed, more children and young people with SEND will be able to access mainstream education and benefit from the wider reforms to attendance, behaviour, curriculum and attainment alongside their peers.

This represents an important shift towards a more inclusive education system. However, the reforms stop short of asking a broader question: should some of the assumptions that shape how mainstream education is organised themselves evolve to better reflect the diversity of learners they are intended to serve? Rather than questioning some of the assumptions that shape participation, behaviour, attendance, learning and success, the wider reforms largely assume these remain common goals for all students, with the role of the SEND reforms being to help more children and young people access them successfully.

The central question is therefore not whether strengthening support is important. It clearly is. The question is

[13] Department for Education (2026). SEND reform: putting children and young people first. (Accessed 24 July 2026).

whether strengthening support alone is sufficient to deliver genuinely inclusive education in practice.

Clarity on the what, flexibility on the how

The Government is clearer about what it wants schools and colleges to achieve than about the practical changes schools and colleges will need to make. The White Paper clearly describes aims such as removing barriers, adapting teaching and understanding the reasons behind behaviour. But it gives much less detail about what these aims should look like from day to day in schools and colleges.

This is particularly important if the ambition is to move beyond individual adjustments towards a more consistently inclusive approach across teaching, behaviour, attendance and the wider education environment. While the White Paper combines SEND-specific reforms with wider reforms to attendance, behaviour, attainment and the curriculum, it is less clear about how these reforms will work together to create a consistently inclusive education system.

A focus on clearer expectations, not new legal duties

Existing duties under the Equality Act 2010[14] already require schools and colleges to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students. The Government proposes that changes therefore focus only on strengthening how these duties are understood and implemented through clearer expectations, guidance, standards, training and professional support to improve the Universal Offer.

Whether this will be sufficient to achieve consistent change, particularly in the context of workforce pressures, competing priorities and limited resources, will be central to success.

Ultimately, the success of the wider programme depends not only on strengthening schools and colleges' capacity to support autistic children and young people, but on developing a shared understanding of what genuinely inclusive education looks like in practice. Until these foundations are developed, tested and embedded, it will remain difficult to judge whether the strengthened Universal Offer can deliver not only greater access to mainstream education, but better outcomes for autistic children and young people.

[14] UK Parliament (2010). Equality act 2010.

What we learned from autistic young people

Throughout the workshops, autistic young people consistently challenged assumptions about what inclusion should look like in practice.

They questioned many of the assumptions that shape how education is organised, from how students participate in lessons to how behaviour, attendance and success are understood. Rather than seeing a mainstream placement, in itself, as a measure of inclusion, they defined success by whether education enables students to participate, belong, learn and thrive.

Young people shared dozens of practical ideas about what enables them to access learning, participate and belong in education. They described schools and colleges that adapt before expecting students to adapt; where flexibility, trust and choice are part of everyday practice; where barriers are anticipated rather than responded to in crisis; and where success is measured not only through attendance and attainment, but also through participation, belonging, wellbeing and confidence. In other words, they described schools and colleges that continually question whether the way education is organised enables every child and young person to thrive.

Underpinning all of these principles was a simple expectation: that schools and colleges should trust autistic young people as experts in their own experiences, believe them and involve them in decisions about the support they receive.

> **“These changes will also benefit all students, not necessarily just autistic students.”**

> **“Turn ‘can’t do’ schools into ‘can do’ schools.”**
>
> Rosanna

What are autistic young people and their families saying?

Our 2026 survey of autistic young people who had attended mainstream education, and their families, paints a clear picture of what helps autistic children and young people thrive.

The support most often rated as **"very important"** included:

- teachers (93%) and other staff (89%) having a good understanding of autism
- teaching that meets different learning needs (87%)
- access to quiet or break-out spaces (84%)
- positive peer relationships (84%)
- behaviour approaches that understand behaviour as communication (81%)
- adaptations to curriculum and learning tasks (80%)
- supportive sensory environments (78%)
- access to specialist staff, such as therapists or specialist teachers (76%)
- smaller classes or group learning (75%)

Yet respondents said these forms of support were "rarely" or "never" available an average of 62.2% of the time.

Confidence in the system was correspondingly low:

- **91%** did not believe mainstream schools currently have the capacity to support more autistic children and young people to thrive.
- **88%** believed stronger accountability is needed to ensure support is delivered consistently in practice.

Open responses reinforced these findings. Families repeatedly described schools overlooking autistic needs until the children had already reached crisis point.

- *"Things were not put in place until complete school refusal resulting from autistic burnout. Before this we were told 'she's fine in school'."*
- *"My child masks at school and so needs are not recognised."*
- *"A child can be technically 'attending' school while still paying an extremely high emotional and physiological cost for doing so."*

Together, these responses suggest that many autistic children and young people are still expected to adapt to education systems that do not consistently recognise or respond to their needs, often at significant cost to their wellbeing, participation and learning.

Principle 4: Building a system young people can trust

HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE WHAT WE WANT HAPPENS?

Ambitious about Autism's principle

Rather than a battle for basic adjustments, autistic children and young people need a SEND system that works by design. Too many still experience unmet need, lost learning and worsening mental health before support arrives, if it arrives at all.

A system that relies on goodwill, parental advocacy or legal challenge to secure support is not a system families can trust. Genuine inclusion cannot depend on aspiration alone. It requires clear rights, strong accountability and reliable support that children and families can access consistently, regardless of where they live or which school and college they attend.

The legal framework already establishes many of these principles. The challenge is not simply what the law says, but whether it is implemented consistently in practice. This means ensuring the system delivers support that autistic children, young people and families can access consistently, rely on in practice, and trust to meet their needs without unnecessary barriers or legal challenge.

What the Government is proposing?

The Government's proposals across the white paper Every child achieving and thriving[15] and the consultation SEND Reform: putting children and young people first[16] would fundamentally change how children and young people access support, how specialist provision is organised and how families can challenge decisions.

Taken together, these proposals represent one of the most significant redesigns of the SEND system since the Children and Families Act 2014.

While many of the proposals remain at an early stage of development, they raise important questions about implementation, accountability and trust.

[15] Department for Education (2026). Every Child Achieving and Thriving.
[16] Department for Education (2026). SEND reform: putting children and young people first.

A fundamentally different framework for SEND support

The Government proposes replacing the current SEND system with three "layers": Targeted, Targeted Plus and Specialist.

Children and young people in the Targeted and Targeted Plus layers would receive support funded directly by schools and colleges. Only those in the Specialist layer – children and young people whose needs are considered "beyond what mainstream schools and colleges can routinely provide" – would remain eligible for an EHCP, a specialist placement or Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) provision funded by the local authority.

Together, these changes would move the SEND system away from relying mainly on individual statutory assessments. Instead, most support would be planned and delivered by schools and colleges within a national framework.

The proposed "complex needs" threshold will therefore be crucial because it will become the new legal test for statutory support. The Government needs to define it clearly. Without clear national guidance or established case law, similar children could receive different decisions depending on where they live.

Individual Support Plans (ISPs) without equivalent safeguards

Every child and young person with SEND will have an ISP, setting out the support they will receive day to day. Schools and colleges would have a legal duty to produce and regularly review these plans. However, unlike EHCPs, ISPs will not appear to carry a legal duty to deliver the provision they contain, will fall outside the jurisdiction of the SEND Tribunal, and will normally end when a young person leaves education rather than continuing to age 25.

ISPs would therefore become the main mechanism through which most children and young people receive SEND support, despite offering fewer legal protections and routes of redress than EHCPs.

This proposal has been framed as reducing conflict in the SEND system. However, families often pursue EHCPs and Tribunals because support is not delivered consistently without legal backing, and Tribunals frequently uphold families' rights under existing law. Reducing access to legal protections without first ensuring support is reliably delivered is thus unlikely to reduce conflict and may instead shift disputes onto schools and colleges.

> **"He only got support when it was specified in his legally binding EHCP."**

Nationally defined specialist support

Within the Specialist layer, EHCPs will be based on nationally defined Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs). Children and young people who continue to qualify for an EHCP will receive one linked to one or more SPPs, alongside an ISP explaining how that support will be delivered day to day. EHCP annual reviews will be reduced; they will be reviewed at the end of each key stage until age 16, and annually thereafter.

Before recruiting the independent expert panel that will develop the packages, the Government published only an "indicative list" of SPP categories[17]. The consultation document recognises that a child or young person may need support from more than one SPP, but it is not clear how this will work in practice. SPPs will be linked to a "nationally set costing framework", the details of which are not yet known. It is also unclear how nationally defined packages would reflect the needs of children, like autistic young people, who do not fit neatly within individual categories, require highly personalised support and whose needs change over time.

Autistic young people and their families consistently tell us they want more individually tailored provision, not less. Every autistic person is different, and autistic people have a wide range of individual traits, strengths and needs which will require a different approach. Pupils with this level of need have typically already tried more standardised support and found it has not worked well for them.

Reduced reliance on statutory plans and specialist provision

The reforms are intended to reduce the number of children and young people relying on EHCPs and specialist placements by increasing the support available in mainstream schools and colleges. At the same time, they would make significant changes to how specialist provision is accessed, funded and organised.

Because every student in a specialist school or college would receive an SPP, SPPs could effectively become national eligibility criteria for specialist provision, and the nationally set costing framework could operate as a system of funding bands. Specialist schools and colleges would be expected to organise support around the packages, at the same time as acting "as catalysts for improvements across the system", with a greater focus on outreach to mainstream schools and colleges and potentially providing short-term placements.

[17] Department for Education (2026). SEND reform: putting children and young people first – Specialist Provision Packages (consultation).

> **Nothing other than them being forced to follow the law will give reassurance.**

However, the proposals do not set out an equivalent programme to expand or strengthen specialist capacity. Instead, specialist schools and colleges would take on greater responsibility for supporting mainstream education while access to specialist placements, funding and future growth would become more tightly controlled.

Changes to parental choice and routes of redress

The Government also proposes strengthening the existing legal exceptions to parental preference.

When a child receives an SPP, families will be offered a list of schools and colleges considered able to meet that package. If parents request a different school or college, local authorities will decide whether to agree, taking account of effectiveness, value for money and the needs of other children. Local authorities will also be able to refuse a place in a specialist school or college if it is full.

The SEND Tribunal will remain for some decisions, but their remit and powers will be curtailed in several ways. They will not make decisions about ISPs or EOTAS provision. They will not name which school or college a child or young person should attend – if they disagree with the local authority's decision, the local authority must decide again. Families will be incentivised to "consider" using strengthened mediation processes first.

> **At the moment, many families feel they only receive meaningful responses after complaints, legal escalation or external pressure.**

Together, these proposals would significantly change how families secure support and challenge decisions. Legal safeguards would remain for some parts of the system but would no longer apply to many of the mechanisms through which support is planned, delivered and accessed.

Case study: Integrated Plans at TreeHouse School

At TreeHouse School, teams create a detailed Integrated Plan for pupils who have multiple areas of need. Many of our pupils are involved in multiple therapy programmes, which provide detailed guidance for staff about how to support the pupil's access to learning, beyond that which could fit a typical "adjustment passport". Integrated Plans aim to combine these into a single coherent document.

Integrated Plans start with the young person themselves and are then developed by those who know them well, with input from parents. They are co-produced by the teams who use them, meaning staff can account for contextual factors such as the needs of other pupils in the class. While more experienced class teams can often produce plans independently, less experienced teams need substantial support from specialists such as Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists.

Each of our pupils is different, and their Integrated Plan goes into substantial levels of detail, including:

- How the pupil shows they are happy and regulated
- How to support the pupil to stay regulated, engaged and having fun in and out of school
- When and how to interact with the pupil
- How the pupil shows they are listening or that they do not want to interact
- How the pupil shows their emotions or expresses discomfort
- How to support the pupil to understand, express themselves and make choices
- How to support routines and important choices for the pupil
- How to support the pupil when things change
- What support the pupil needs for transitions, travel, personal care, completing tasks and other specific activities or times of day
- What can cause the pupil to become dysregulated
- How the pupil shows they are dysregulated
- How to support the pupil, and what to avoid, when they are dysregulated

Plans typically take 6–12 weeks to complete, with relevant staff meeting across the learner's first half-term to share information about the learner and which supports have worked well. Where specialist involvement is needed, creating a plan may take longer.

Integrated Plans are reviewed at least annually, or sooner if changes are observed. As part of the quality monitoring process, observations check whether randomly selected Integrated Plans are being followed.

Case study: SPP case studies

The following case studies draw on real examples from our work at TreeHouse School. They illustrate some of the challenges that could arise from the current draft Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs), particularly where pupils' needs do not fit neatly within a single category or where similar needs require very different forms of support.

The examples show why SPPs need to be flexible enough to respond to the individual needs of each child or young person, rather than assuming that a particular need or presentation will always require the same provision.

Significant executive function

Executive functioning typically describes higher-order cognitive functions some neurodivergent people find difficult, such as switching tasks. However, this SPP is aimed at those with "severe and permanent global learning disability", or "lifelong speech or language disorder".

- **Amir** has strong abilities in maths and science, vocabulary and factual knowledge. However, he has difficulty planning and starting tasks, cognitive flexibility and managing multiple demands.
  Amir went to a mainstream school with minimal adjustments. He was unable to engage due to overwhelming sensory environments, the executive load of managing competing demands, and lack of alignment with therapeutic support. The curriculum did not teach him the skills he needed to manage these challenges, prioritising attainment over preparation for adulthood.
  As a result, Amir experienced frequent shutdowns, was unable to complete work in class, and his attendance decreased until he dropped out entirely at 15. Although he completed strong A-Levels through home education, he was unable to move into higher education as he had not been supported to develop the skills he needed. He is currently not in education, employment or training.

- **Beth** does not have a learning disability. She experiences multiple challenges in executive functioning, including difficulties with organisation, flexible thinking and independently structuring tasks.

Beth's specialist secondary school offered a highly individualised education package. Her curriculum was academically challenging while explicitly teaching the adaptive skills required to participate in learning and life beyond school. She was offered structured opportunities to apply these skills in the real world, with predictable routines and low-arousal environments. This has enabled Beth to engage with learning, increase her independence and regulate her anxiety.

Beth is now undertaking a supported internship, where she is successfully learning to advocate for herself and request reasonable adjustments.

Social and emotional development

There are two separate SPPs under this label: one focused on "externalising behaviour", described as "behaviour that challenges", and one focused on "internalising behaviour", described as "withdrawal, disengagement or 'shut down'".

- **Ezra** has limited expressive language and significant sensory differences. When he is overwhelmed, he might shout, throw objects and run from the room.

  This is due to sensory differences, not a social or emotional issue, so supports aimed at social and emotional development are unlikely to address the distress and subsequent behaviour. Ezra needs a low-arousal learning environment, proactive sensory regulation throughout the day, communication support to help Ezra signal overload earlier, and staff who are trained to recognise sensory overload and respond with regulation and adaptation.

- **Shannon** experiences significant sensory sensitivities and frequent shutdowns. She also experiences alexithymia, meaning she finds it difficult to identify and describe her emotions.

  An "off-the-shelf" intervention for emotional literacy may not work for Shannon, as it may assume emotional awareness, labelling and reflection skills she cannot access. Instead, Shannon needs sensory adaptations and predictable routines to reduce shutdowns, low-demand responses when this does happen, and alternative communication options that do not rely on emotional identification or verbal explanation.

- **Pablo** finds change very difficult. When something unexpected happens, he withdraws, disengages and shuts down. During transitions, his behaviour can present a risk to those around him.

  By the definitions given in the draft SPPs, Pablo shows both internalising and externalising behaviours – yet the SPPs separate these completely. Pablo would benefit from clear routines, advance notice of changes and carefully

scaffolded transitions, as well as building in flexibility, increased adult support and risk-informed planning for when he does become distressed.

- **Harry** finds impulse control difficult and has challenges in social and emotional understanding. He often attempts to touch women in intimate areas and uses a lot of force to do so.
  Unlike some of the other case studies, Harry has clear social and emotional development needs; however, these are not addressed by the current draft SPPs. Harry needs an individualised specialist programme addressing consent, personal boundaries and bodily autonomy, using concrete language and visual supports. Harry also needs specialist multi-agency involvement to support impulse control, alongside consistent boundaries and proportionate close supervision, to reduce the risk to himself and others.

- **Dylan and Esme** are siblings. Both are highly sensitive to noise. Dylan attends a large secondary school that he initially found overwhelming. He was more able to engage after the school provided ear defenders and a quiet place to work away from the classroom. When Esme moved up to the same school, they proactively offered her the same supports – but she reacted very differently.
  Esme has difficulties with emotional regulation and demand avoidance, as well as heightened threat perception. Ear defenders increased her sense of vulnerability as she could not hear what was going on around her, and removal from the classroom made her feel that she had lost control. Instead, she benefits from subtle strategies to manage noise in the environment, flexible expectations, and predictable support when she is overwhelmed.
  Although Dylan and Esme are very similar, their differences mean their needs cannot be met in the same way. A one-size-fits-all package of support, without tailoring to the individual, could not have worked for them both.

Further support needed to access the curriculum

There are two proposed SPPs based around provision needed to enable access to the national curriculum (as opposed to adapting the curriculum itself): “sensory impairment” and “physical disability”. However, there are many autistic pupils who need specialist support to access the curriculum but do not fall within these categories.

- **Aaron** has average cognitive ability and strong factual knowledge. However, his auditory processing differences mean he struggles to distinguish the teacher’s voice from background noise. By the time he processes the information, the rest of the class have moved on. As a result, Aaron misses

key information about tasks and learning objectives when shared verbally, so he begins work incorrectly or gives up.
Aaron needs a quiet learning environment and different approaches to teaching, such as written or visual instructions and smaller groups.

- **Bibi** enjoys learning and can follow the content of the national curriculum. She struggles with working memory and integrating information. When lessons involve multi-step instructions or holding several pieces of information in mind, Bibi is unable to keep track of what she is meant to be doing and cannot engage with the lesson.
  Bibi needs tasks that are designed to reduce working memory demands, with written checklists, task cards or visual schedules embedded. She needs to be taught in ways that introduce information bit by bit, not all at once.

- **Frankie** finds unstructured and open-ended tasks extremely difficult. When expectations are broad or unclear, they cannot work out where to start and disengage from the lesson.
  Frankie needs learning tasks to have a clear structure, boundaries and defined outcomes, with explicit explanation of success criteria. They would also benefit from consistent lesson formats to reduce the cognitive load of interpreting task requirements.

- **Gabriella** shows strong academic potential, but her engagement in lessons is inconsistent. She has sensory sensitivities and finds it difficult to recognise when she is overwhelmed, tired, or experiencing other physical discomfort such as thirst. By the afternoon, unmet needs significantly reduce her ability to concentrate and engage.
  Although the curriculum does not change, Gabriella's access to it fluctuates in predictable patterns. She needs timetabling and curriculum planning that accounts for this, with flexible expectations around engagement at different times of the day. She would also benefit from scheduled opportunities for movement, hydration and sensory regulation, and occupational therapy input focused on recognising and responding to bodily needs.

What we learned from autistic young people

Autistic young people welcomed the ambition of providing earlier support and reducing reliance on diagnosis, but they consistently emphasised that these reforms should be judged not by whether they introduce new processes, but by whether they result in better support in practice.

Trust starts with fair, holistic needs assessments

Across our workshops, young people told us that the success of these reforms will depend heavily on how children and young people's needs are assessed. They raised serious concerns about whether assessments will be fair, sufficiently detailed and trusted by families, and had particularly low confidence in schools and colleges carrying out Targeted and Targeted Plus assessments. The group felt these assessments should be comparable to the proposed EHCP needs assessment, with the same level of detail.

Many questioned how schools and colleges would reliably identify students whose needs are less visible, including those who are undiagnosed, masking distress or experiencing fluctuating needs. They consistently argued that assessments should build a full picture of the individual child, accounting for a wide range of needs and profiles rather than making assumptions based on academic performance or outward presentation. They should involve and support young people directly, explore each domain of need in depth and clearly explain the support available. Involving autistic children and young people in designing assessment processes can also help challenge assumptions and identify where categories or thresholds may fail to reflect lived experience.

For young people, a good needs assessment should be thorough, open-minded and focused on the whole child. It should ask what support a child needs to learn, communicate, manage their emotions and sensory needs, feel that they belong, stay well and prepare for adulthood. Most importantly, the assessment should lead to support that is actually provided.

National consistency should support personalisation, not replace it

Young people had mixed views on whether nationally defined SPPs could work at all. Those who believed they had potential stressed that this would depend on their ability to remain flexible and personalised. Some also

expressed concern that SPPs could ultimately be used to reduce eligibility for specialist support as a cost-saving measure.

Rather than fixed packages, participants described a “library” or “pick 'n' mix” model, allowing each child and young person to access the combination of evidence-based support they need. They argued that SPPs should adapt as children's needs change over time rather than requiring individuals to fit predefined categories.

The group also raised major concerns about how autism is framed within the draft SPP categories, arguing that they place too much emphasis on outward presentation and behaviour rather than underlying need. They identified significant gaps in areas particularly relevant to autistic people and called on the Government to review the proposed categories alongside autistic children and young people before implementation.

More broadly, participants felt that national consistency should improve equity of access without reducing personalised support. They consistently argued that national frameworks should create greater consistency in the quality of support available, while still allowing professionals and young people to tailor that support to the individual.

Plans do not improve lives unless support is delivered

Young people welcomed earlier support that does not depend on diagnosis and recognised the potential for ISPs to improve wellbeing, participation and preparation for adulthood. However, they consistently questioned whether ISPs would improve everyday experiences unless they were accompanied by legal accountability, sufficient resources and wider improvements to mainstream education.

Many reflected that it is already difficult to secure support even with an EHCP and argued that the system needs greater accountability, not less. The group called for a legal requirement to deliver the support set out in ISPs, alongside clear routes of redress where families disagree with decisions.

Young people also noted that it remains unclear how eligibility for an ISP will be assessed and who will ultimately be responsible for issuing, writing and reviewing the plan. They questioned whether the proposed system would be equally accessible to all families, particularly where parents face language barriers, lower confidence navigating complex systems or greater barriers to advocating for support.

Young people also raised concerns that, without significant improvements to workforce capacity and training, ISPs could become generic, inconsistent or unrealistic in practice. They described existing SEND plans that are often vague, inconsistently implemented or dependent on individual goodwill.

Overall, they consistently argued that support planning should focus on

whether autistic children and young people are genuinely able to thrive, rather than narrowly measuring attendance, attainment or behaviour. ISPs should recognise emotional wellbeing, mental health, trauma, masking, social communication, independence, life skills, trusted relationships and preparation for adulthood. They should also remain flexible enough to reflect the “spiky profiles” of many autistic young people rather than reducing support to broad categories.

Young people did not believe that new assessments, plans or packages would build trust on their own. Trust will depend on whether every part of the system works together to provide reliable, personalised support and improve autistic children and young people's everyday experiences of education.

What are autistic young people and their families saying?

Trust in the new system will depend on confidence that support will be delivered

Responses to our 2026 survey consistently showed that families rely on EHCPs because they provide legal certainty that support will be delivered.

- 71% applied for an EHCP because they wanted support to be legally guaranteed.
- 66.7% applied to access specialist provision or specialist services.
- 65.9% said SEN Support alone was insufficient.
- 62.5% felt needs were not being properly identified or understood.

Respondents reported that EHCPs frequently secured support which they believed should already have been available through mainstream provision, including:

- quiet spaces or break-out areas (59.9%);
- teaching assistant support (58.2%);
- one-to-one support (56.1%);
- smaller classes or group learning (55.8%);
- curriculum adaptations (54.3%);
- supportive sensory environments (53.7%);
- specialist staff (53.4%); and
- specialist schools and colleges (51.0%).

Although 66.4% found obtaining an EHCP difficult, once in place respondents viewed them much more positively than SEN Support.

- Only 25% said EHCP support was rarely or never delivered.

- By comparison, 75% found securing SEN Support difficult and 44% said agreed support was rarely or never implemented.

Confidence in the proposed ISP model was also consistently low. When asked what would increase confidence in ISPs, respondents consistently prioritised accountability:

- clear accountability for delivering support (83%);
- legal protections ensuring support is delivered (83%);
- specialist involvement (82%);
- meaningful involvement of children, young people and families (81%);
- staff training (80%);
- regular reviews (80%);
- national standards (80%); and
- clear routes for challenge and redress (78%).

Overall, respondents' concerns centred less on producing plans than on ensuring support is consistently delivered in practice.

Complexity should be defined by support needs, not narrow thresholds

Survey findings suggest an important mismatch between how Government proposes to define eligibility for statutory support and how autistic young people and families experience complexity. Although:

- 43% reported a learning disability; and
- 32% reported being fully or partly non-speaking,
- 66% nevertheless described their or their child's educational needs as complex.

Respondents most commonly identified complexity as arising from the need for:

- specialist support (85%);
- sensory support (84%);
- learning differences or learning disability (84%);
- social communication support (80%);
- physical health support (77%); and
- mental health support (77%).

Families consistently described complexity as arising from the interaction between autistic children and their environments, rather than solely from academic attainment, learning disability or visible impairment. Open-text responses repeatedly highlighted concerns that students who mask distress, are academically able or fall between categories risk being overlooked.

One-size-fits-all approaches will not meet autistic children and young people' needs

Respondents expressed significant concerns about introducing nationally standardised SPPs.

- 65% disagreed or strongly disagreed that standardised specialist support packages could meet autistic children and young people' needs.

Families repeatedly emphasised that autistic children present with highly individual profiles of strengths and needs and that specialist provision must remain sufficiently flexible to respond to this diversity. There was also widespread concern about reducing parental choice. When asked what should matter most when deciding school placements, respondents prioritised:

- the child's individual needs;
- staff expertise;
- the support available; and
- the learning environment.

Factors such as cost, availability of places and distance were consistently ranked much lower.

Families believe conflict is driven by failures in the system, not by parents

Across the survey, families consistently rejected the idea that conflict exists because parents are unwilling to work collaboratively. Respondents instead described escalating concerns only after repeated attempts to secure support through ordinary routes had failed. Among respondents with experience of different dispute resolution mechanisms:

- 45.4% found school complaints procedures ineffective;
- 64.3% found informal discussions with schools or local authorities ineffective;
- 65.9% found mediation ineffective; whereas
- 57.0% found SEND Tribunals effective.

Similarly, 65% disagreed or strongly disagreed with reducing the weight given to parental preference in placement decisions.

Open-text responses consistently described Tribunals as exhausting and adversarial, but often the only mechanism that successfully secured support. Many respondents warned that reducing access to EHCPs, Tribunal routes and parental preference before replacement systems have demonstrated equivalent effectiveness risks increasing rather than reducing conflict.

Principle 5: Invest in the change you want to see

WHAT CONDITIONS MAKE IT ALL POSSIBLE?

Ambitious about Autism's principle

A genuinely inclusive education system needs more than new policies. Schools and colleges need the funding, expertise, leadership and time to put those policies into practice. Ambition, culture and accountability will have little effect if Schools and colleges and services do not have the people and resources needed to deliver consistent support.

Ultimately, resourcing is not one part of SEND reform. It is what determines whether every other reform succeeds. Every proposal in the White Paper depends on schools and colleges having the workforce, expertise, leadership, specialist support and time to deliver it well. Without those foundations, reforms risk raising expectations without improving children's experiences. At a time when Government is focused on opportunity, growth and economic participation, investing in autistic children and young people is not simply the cost of reform. It is the investment that makes reform possible.

What the Government is proposing

The White Paper, Every child achieving and thriving18, and the consultation, SEND Reform: putting children and young people first19, propose major changes to how SEND support is funded, organised and delivered. The plans include giving more funding directly to mainstream schools and colleges, investing in staff development, improving access to specialist expertise and creating more inclusive learning environments. Specialist schools and colleges would continue to educate children and young people with the most complex needs.

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[18] Department for Education (2026). Every Child Achieving and Thriving. (Accessed 25 July 2026).

[19] Department for Education (2026). SEND reform: putting children and young people first. (Accessed 24 July 2026).

Ultimately, the ambition is to enable mainstream schools and colleges to meet the needs of more children and young people with SEND, reducing reliance on statutory processes and specialist placements where appropriate. However, as more funding is delegated directly to mainstream schools and colleges, robust accountability will be essential to ensure that earlier support expands genuine choice rather than limiting it. Without clear safeguards, there is a risk that children and young people remain in mainstream schools and colleges because funding is available there, rather than because those schools and colleges genuinely meet their needs.

Success will depend not only on changing structures, but on whether schools and colleges and services have the funding, workforce, specialist expertise and implementation capacity needed to deliver consistently in practice. The ultimate test of these reforms will be therefore not whether each individual proposal is implemented, but whether the system as a whole delivers better outcomes for autistic children and young people. Three considerations are particularly important:

Funding must not come at the expense of personalised, quality support

The reforms shift the system away from responding to individual crises towards planning support across the wider school or college population, and from funding attached to statutory processes towards investment in mainstream capacity. This has the potential to improve access to earlier support, but it must not come at the expense of personalised provision.

Planning ahead should not mean planning for a “typical” autistic child or youg person. Autistic children and young people have highly individual combinations of strengths, needs and aspirations, and funding should continue to reflect the true distribution and complexity of SEND across the population.

At the same time, reducing reliance on diagnosis and statutory processes must not become synonymous with reducing access to quality, enforceable support. Removing diagnosis as the gateway to funding does not remove the need to identify children's needs accurately. Instead, the reforms replace a system where the principal barrier is accessing statutory support with one where the principal risk becomes securing consistent delivery through mainstream provision. Unless schools and colleges have the expertise, resources, accountability and legal expectations needed to deliver support reliably, families may simply encounter a different barrier at a different point in the journey.

Mainstream inclusion cannot come at the expense of specialist education

The reforms reflect an important shift from concentrating expertise within specialist schools and colleges towards sharing it more widely across mainstream education. However, while the White Paper sets out a broad strategy for developing the mainstream workforce, it provides much less detail on how the specialist workforce needed to deliver these reforms will be expanded and sustained.

Redistributing expertise from already stretched services risks reducing the capacity available to the children and young people who continue to rely on specialist support.

Universal provision can reduce, but cannot eliminate, the need for specialist assessment, intervention and education. Specialist schools and colleges are not simply different locations. They provide specialist staff, therapeutic expertise, adapted environments and an educational culture built around students' needs – functions that cannot easily be replicated within mainstream schools and colleges.

This makes it concerning that High Needs capital funding is already encouraging greater investment in mainstream provision while Inclusion Bases are being positioned as a key mechanism for supporting more autistic children and young people, despite the model still being developed and limited evidence of its effectiveness at scale.

Inclusion requires transformation, not small adjustments

The reforms rightly recognise that inclusion depends on much more than where children are educated. They seek to make SEND and inclusion part of the everyday expertise of the education workforce through adaptive teaching, earlier identification and greater understanding of barriers to learning.

This is an important shift. However, effective adaptations depend on understanding why barriers exist[20]. For autistic children and young people, this requires knowledge of sensory differences, communication, executive functioning, masking and anxiety. Autism-specific understanding therefore strengthens, rather than competes with, adaptive teaching.

The reforms also recognise that inclusive environments are as important as inclusive teaching. Buildings, shared spaces and schools and college design all influence whether autistic children and young people can participate, regulate and learn. Yet many mainstream schools and colleges operate in buildings that were never designed with these needs in mind. Creating quiet spaces,

[20] Education Endowment Foundation (n.d.) Universal Approaches.

sensory environments, flexible teaching areas or Inclusion Bases often requires significant capital investment and long-term planning. Without sustained investment in both people and places, there is a risk that inclusion becomes a series of incremental adjustments rather than the transformational change needed to enable more autistic children and young people to thrive.

What are autistic young people and their families saying?

Responses to our 2026 survey consistently highlighted the positive impact specialist education can have when it is the right placement for the child or young person.

Respondents rated specialist schools substantially more positively than mainstream schools across almost every measure.

- Specialist schools were rated 8.0/10 for helping autistic children and young people thrive, compared with 3.7/10 for mainstream schools and 4.3/10 for Inclusion Bases.
- Teachers and staff in specialist schools were rated 8.5/10 for understanding and supporting autistic children and young people, compared with 3.3/10 in mainstream schools.
- Respondents with experience of specialist education reported substantially lower levels of lost learning (43.0%) than those who attended mainstream schools (82.0%).
- Among respondents with experience of specialist education, support was reported as rarely or never in place only 7.1% of the time on average, compared with 62.2% in mainstream schools and colleges.

Respondents also consistently rejected the assumption that specialist provision can generally be replicated within mainstream schools.

- 84% of respondents with experience of specialist education did not believe their or their child's needs could have been equally met through an Inclusion Base within a mainstream school.
- 73% disagreed or strongly disagreed that more autistic children and young people currently in specialist provision could instead be supported in mainstream schools.
- 77% disagreed or strongly disagreed that Education, Health and Care Plans should mainly be limited to students with the "most complex" needs.
- 61% disagreed or strongly disagreed that specialist provision should mainly be reserved for students with the "most complex" needs.

When asked when autistic children and young people benefit most from specialist education, respondents most frequently identified:

- the need for smaller classes or more individual attention (84%);
- teachers and staff with specialist training (82%);
- when mental health is negatively affected by mainstream environments (81%);
- a personalised or flexible approach to learning (80%); and
- a significantly adapted curriculum (79%).

Although respondents overwhelmingly valued specialist education, many described securing a specialist placement as one of the most difficult parts of the SEND system.

- 74% found obtaining a specialist school place fairly or very difficult, including 55% who found it very difficult.
- The most commonly reported barriers were:
    - disagreement with the local authority (62%);
    - lack of available places (52%); and
    - delays in the assessment process (49%).

These findings suggest that improving mainstream inclusion should not come at the expense of maintaining sufficient specialist capacity. For many autistic children and young people, the challenge is not that specialist education is used too often, but that it remains too difficult to access when it is needed.

What we learned from autistic young people

The Government has proposed two major reforms to strengthen inclusion in mainstream education: Inclusion Bases and a new National Training Programme for the education workforce.

Autistic young people welcomed both proposals and recognised their potential to improve everyday experiences in school or college. However, throughout the workshops they kept returning to two simple questions:

What should Inclusion Bases actually be for?

What should training actually achieve?

When discussing the National Training Programme, young people wanted adults who understand autistic experiences, challenge assumptions, build trusting relationships and adapt their practice to individual students. They emphasised the importance of understanding before responding,

recognising that behaviour often communicates unmet needs rather than defiance.

They also questioned whether the Government's ambition for more inclusive schools and colleges could be achieved without comprehensive, practical training that includes autism and neurodivergence.

Throughout the workshops, they described autism-specific knowledge as essential but often missing from mainstream education. Without it, adults are more likely to misunderstand communication differences, sensory needs, executive functioning, masking and hidden distress, leaving autistic children and young people expected to adapt to environments designed around neurotypical expectations. For participants, effective training was not about raising awareness alone. It should change everyday practice by leading to better decisions, stronger relationships and more personalised support.

Participants repeatedly highlighted that the National Training Programme is not simply another reform. It is one of the foundations on which many of the others depend. Whether schools and colleges can identify need earlier, develop meaningful Individual Support Plans, implement National Inclusion Standards or deliver effective Inclusion Bases will all depend on staff having the knowledge, confidence and support to put these reforms into practice.

While they welcomed the Government's non-statutory guidance[21], young people questioned how Inclusion Bases would work in practice, particularly in large secondary schools.

They raised concerns about whether a single base could meet the needs of students with very different strengths and needs, or whether most schools would have the space and capacity to provide multiple specialist environments. Rather than viewing Inclusion Bases as separate spaces within mainstream schools, young people described them as places that should make participation possible.

They wanted Inclusion Bases to remove barriers, not create them; to provide specialist support without separating students from learning, friendships or the wider life of the school. An Inclusion Base should not become another destination within school. It should be a bridge to belonging, where support happens with autistic children and young people rather than to them, and where young people have genuine choice over how support is accessed, used and reviewed.

Young people were equally clear that Inclusion Bases cannot replace specialist education. While some autistic children and young people may benefit from specialist support within

[21] Department for Education (25 June 2026). Inclusion bases in schools.

mainstream schools, others will continue to require the staffing, expertise, therapeutic support and environments that only specialist schools can provide.

They saw Inclusion Bases as one part of a broader continuum of support – not as an alternative to specialist provision. Without wider improvements to mainstream inclusion, they warned, Inclusion Bases risk becoming holding spaces for students whose needs are not being met elsewhere.

Ultimately, young people argued that the success of these reforms should be judged not by how many staff complete training, how many Inclusion Bases are opened or how much guidance is published, but by whether autistic children and young people experience education differently as a result. Together, these discussions informed two practical frameworks describing what effective National Training and Inclusion Bases should enable, and the principles that should guide their design, implementation and evaluation.

What are autistic young people and their families saying?

National Training Programme

Our 2026 survey found overwhelming support for a comprehensive National Training Programme to equip all education staff with the knowledge and confidence to support autistic children and young people.

- **94%** said teachers who understand autism and neurodiversity are essential for autistic children and young people to thrive in mainstream education.
- **92%** said the same for wider school staff.
- Teachers' preparedness to support autistic children and young people was rated just **3.3/10** in mainstream education, compared with **8.5/10** in specialist education. Similar gaps were seen for school leaders (**3.2/10 vs 8.4/10**) and wider school staff (**3.6/10 vs 8.4/10**).
- **82%** were **not confident** that the proposed National Training Programme would be sufficient to ensure staff have the knowledge and confidence to support autistic children and young people effectively.
- Respondents' highest priorities for the programme were:
    - **92%** – Training should be mandatory
    - **89%** – It should include sensory needs
    - **89%** – It should be delivered to all school staff
    - **89%** – It should include neurodiversity-inclusive content
    - **88%** – It should be regularly updated rather than a one-off session
    - **87%** – It should include autism-specific content

Autism expertise was also ranked as the **single most important factor** in ensuring Inclusion Bases work effectively for autistic children and young people.

Across open-text responses, respondents consistently said that training alone is not enough. They emphasised that it should be mandatory, practical, sufficiently detailed, regularly refreshed and linked to accountability in practice. Many also highlighted the importance of improving understanding of less visible presentations of autism, including masking and internalised distress

- "*Training itself is not the answer… a well-trained teacher who does not have the right environment, support staff and the correct tools cannot teach."*
- *"The system is hostile. The system needs to change."*
- *"Giving a mainstream school a bit of extra cash and calling it 'inclusive' is not going to change the attitudes of the teachers."*
- *"This training needs to be in depth, regular and in place for all existing school staff."*
- *"Training should be accountable by those taking it on."*
- *"Teachers are not well positioned to identify children who are quiet."*
- *"Girls often mask and camouflage to fit in which comes with a huge cost."*

Inclusion Bases

Autistic young people and families recognised the potential of Inclusion Bases to support participation in mainstream education. However, they consistently emphasised that their success depends on how they are designed, staffed and implemented.

- Inclusion Bases were rated **4.3/10** for helping autistic children and young people thrive in mainstream education – higher than mainstream education alone (**3.7/10**), but substantially lower than specialist education (**8.0/10**).
- Respondents' highest priorities for Inclusion Bases were:
    - staff with expertise in autism (average rank **2.97**)
    - access to qualified teachers (not only support staff) (average rank **4.68**)
    - small group teaching (average rank **5.27**)
    - a clear purpose and appropriate use of the base (average rank **5.29**)
    - access to therapies or specialist services (average rank **5.46**)
    - a supportive sensory environment (average rank **5.65**)
    - access to quiet spaces or break-out areas (average rank **5.77**)
    - good communication and collaboration with families (average rank **5.95**)
- Across these highest-priority features, an average of **45.7%** of respondents said they were **rarely or never** in place.

- **84%** of respondents with experience of specialist education **did not** believe their or their child's needs could have been equally met through an Inclusion Base in a mainstream school.

Across the open-text responses, respondents consistently described wide variation in the quality and purpose of Inclusion Bases. Many welcomed the concept but were concerned that, in practice, some bases become behaviour-management spaces or places where autistic children and young people are separated from learning, rather than environments designed to support participation, belonging and access to education.

- *"In our experience, the inclusion base has frequently been used as a behaviour management tool rather than a supportive environment."*
- *"It has been used as a place to "house" my child away from the rest of the school with little teacher input/actual education taking place."*
- *"The base was noisy, chaotic... and predominantly understaffed."*
- *"A small school can solve noise and crowds. Inclusion Bases never will."*
- *"It helped my son and he made improvements. But at a special needs school he really shows what he can do."*
- *"At my child's state-funded primary school they did a learning unit. This only lasted a year. My son made great progress while he was in there, but they run out of funding, and he made no progress for the further three years"*
- *"He felt lonely, excluded and diminished. He tried to join mainstream and was repeatedly sent back to the unit."*

Key proposals in detail

The following sections provide a practical guide to the key proposals, ambitions and wider reforms that are most likely to shape the future SEND system. They are not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of every proposal in the White Paper. Many reforms remain at different stages of development and further detail will emerge over time.

Instead, this guide brings together the proposals most likely to influence autistic children and young people's experiences of education. For each, we summarise its current purpose, where it sits in the reform programme, and the key implementation considerations identified by autistic young people and Ambitious about Autism.

Together, these sections provide a snapshot of the current reform landscape. Ambitious about Autism will continue to monitor how these proposals develop, including whether they are implemented as intended and whether they deliver the improvements in autistic children and young people's experiences and outcomes that the Government hopes to achieve.

SEND Code of Practice

Current position

The Government has committed to consulting separately on a revised SEND Code of Practice following the publication of the White Paper. The revised Code will support implementation of the wider reforms, including the new National Inclusion Standards, Needs Assessments, Individual Support Plans and Specialist Provision Packages. Alongside the revised Code, the Government has proposed replacing the current four statutory "areas of need" with five new "Areas of Development": Executive function; Motor and physical; Sensory development; Speech, language and communication; Social and emotional. These proposals are currently in draft form and remain subject to consultation, with the final framework expected to be confirmed through the revised SEND Code of Practice.

Purpose

The revised Code of Practice is intended to become the central statutory guidance underpinning implementation of the reforms, translating the Government's vision into everyday practice. It will set out the responsibilities of schools and colleges, operationalise the National Inclusion Standards, explain the new Areas of Development, strengthen teachers' confidence and professional judgement, and support schools and colleges to deliver inclusive practice while fulfilling their existing legal duties.

Key considerations

The revised SEND Code of Practice underpins many of the wider reforms and will be central to their successful implementation. The proposed consultation provides an important opportunity to refine how the reforms will operate in practice. However, if this consultation is to be meaningful, it will inevitably have implications for the wider implementation timetable. At the time of writing, it is unclear when the revised Code will be published, how any changes arising from consultation will be reflected across the wider reforms, or whether schools, colleges, and other education providers will have sufficient time to prepare, train staff and embed new approaches before implementation begins.

The proposed Areas of Development also raise important implementation questions about how they will be applied consistently in practice. At the time of writing, there is limited information about how education professionals will be trained to use the revised framework, how consistency of decision-making will be monitored nationally, or how the effectiveness of the new categories will be evaluated following implementation. Clarifying these arrangements will be particularly important if the Areas of Development are intended to inform Needs Assessments, Individual Support Plans and Specialist Provision Packages across the wider SEND system.

Moreover, the proposed Areas of Development represent one of the most significant changes within the revised Code of Practice. Some aspects of the draft framework may better reflect the experiences of autistic children and young people, including the explicit recognition of executive functioning for the first time and the inclusion of sensory processing needs within the proposed ‘Sensory development’ domain.

However, some of the proposed Areas of Development may be a bad fit for autistic children and young people, many of whom have needs that span all five categories. For example, removing “interaction” from the proposed ‘Speech, language and communication’ domain could disadvantage autistic children and young people who communicate fluently but experience significant social communication differences. Similarly, while the inclusion of the ‘Executive functioning’ domain is welcome, the removal of other aspects of cognition and learning risk these needs being overlooked. We are also concerned that mental health – a key area of need for many autistic children and young people – has been removed from the proposed new ‘Social and emotional’ domain, risking a gap in support for where a student’s mental health challenges impact their learning.

Like the current areas of need, the proposed Areas of Development are broad by nature and cannot anticipate every possible presentation of need or replace diagnosis in helping understand specific clusters of need. This is particularly true for autistic children and young people, who often have “spiky profiles” of strengths and challenges and who experience barriers across more than one domain. It is therefore critical that any new system allows for a holistic understanding of individual needs,

and that the domains support, rather than constrain, personalised assessment and support.

As understanding of neurodevelopment, learning and inclusion continues to evolve, the revised Code should support ongoing review rather than representing a fixed framework. The consultation provides an important opportunity for continued co-production and development of the framework with autistic young people, including through piloting and evaluating new models of support, alongside greater ambition in building the evidence base around neurodiverse needs that have historically been overlooked.

National Inclusion Standards

Current position
To be developed by 2028, supported by an Expert Panel, alongside an evidence base and a digital library of tools and interventions.

Purpose
To establish a shared national understanding of good inclusive practice, setting clear expectations for mainstream schools and colleges, supporting more consistent leadership, teaching, provision, improvement and accountability, while moving inclusion from reactive to proactive practice.

Key considerations
Key questions include how lived experience will shape the Standards, how success will be measured, and what will give them authority in practice. The Standards will also need to balance national consistency with ambitious expectations for high-quality, personalised support, ensuring consistency raises standards rather than simply reducing variation. As an evidence-led framework, they should also actively strengthen the evidence base in areas where evidence is limited or still emerging, so the Standards reflect not only what is currently known, but also what children and young people need.

Reasonable Adjustments Guidance

Current position
To be developed by 2028, working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and education partners.

Purpose
To strengthen understanding of schools and colleges' existing duties under the Equality Act 2010 by repositioning reasonable adjustments as a cornerstone of inclusive practice. The guidance aims to promote earlier, anticipatory adjustments, decouple support from diagnosis, and broaden schools and colleges' understanding

of how reasonable adjustments can be embedded across teaching, behaviour, environments and wider school or college life.

Key considerations

Key questions include who will help develop the guidance, how success will be measured, and whether it will provide sufficiently practical and comprehensive examples to support confident implementation. Care will also be needed to ensure these examples illustrate, rather than become an exhaustive checklist of what reasonable adjustments can include. Meaningful engagement with disabled children and young people, including autistic children and young people, will be essential to ensure the guidance reflects the diversity of needs and continues to support personalised, flexible and evolving inclusive practice.

School Inclusion Strategy

Current position

The Government will replace the SEN Information Report with an annual whole-school Inclusion Strategy, expected from December 2026. The Inclusion Strategy will be informed by the National Inclusion Standards and is expected to become part of future statutory SEND duties, with Ofsted considering it as part of inspection.

Purpose

Schools are currently required to publish a SEN Information Report describing the SEND provision they make available. However, there is no consistent requirement for schools to set out their strategic plan for inclusion, explaining how they identify barriers to inclusion, prioritise improvement, allocate resources or evaluate the impact of their approach over time. The proposal aims to strengthen transparency, strategic planning and accountability by embedding inclusion within whole-school improvement.

Key considerations

The Inclusion Strategy’s impact will likely depend on several proposals that are still in development, including the National Inclusion Standards, the revised SEND Code of Practice and the proposed legislative duty. Its value will also likely depend on whether schools accurately identify the barriers experienced by autistic children and young people, use evidence and autistic children and young people's participation to shape priorities, allocate resources effectively and regularly evaluate whether their actions are improving outcomes. Important questions remain about implementation. How will autistic children and young people help shape and review School Inclusion Strategies? How will schools and Ofsted judge whether a Strategy has been successful, and what role will autistic children and young people' experiences play in that evaluation? Finally, how can the accountability framework encourage ambitious,

high-quality improvement, rather than incentivising schools to set less ambitious goals that are easier to achieve?

Attendance strategy

Current position

Improving attendance is a central government priority. The Government aims to reduce the overall absence rate from 7.15% in the 2023-24 academic year to 5.85% by 2028-29, equivalent to children attending 20 million additional days of school each year by 2028-29.

Purpose

To improve attendance by helping schools and colleges identify and remove barriers through earlier intervention, stronger relationships, better use of data and coordinated support. The White Paper adopts a support-first approach, recognising attendance as an outcome of engagement, belonging and effective partnerships rather than simply compliance.

Key considerations

The strategy recognises children with SEND as a priority group and acknowledges that barriers to attendance are complex but provides relatively little analysis of the distinct barriers experienced by SEND students or autistic children and young people or how the proposed reforms will address them. Successful implementation will likely depend on whether schools and colleges have the expertise, resources and flexibility to identify and remove those barriers, how the strategy aligns with wider SEND and inclusion reforms, and how success will be measured specifically for autistic children and young people. As the Government continues to build the evidence base, implementation should reflect emerging evidence that improving attendance depends on understanding and responding to individual barriers[22], strong relationships and a sense of belonging[23], rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

Attainment Strategy

Current position

Improving educational attainment is a central government priority. The Government aims to increase the national average Attainment 8 score from 45.9 in 2023-24 to 50 by the end of this Parliament, halve the Key Stage 4 disadvantage gap from 15.4 to 7.7 Attainment 8 points, and increase the proportion of students achieving the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at Key Stage 2 above the 2019 peak. It has also committed to consulting on a new secondary school

[22] Education Endowment Foundation (2026). Four new evaluations of programmes and approaches designed to improve attendance and prevent persistent absence.
[23] Public First (2026). Listening to young people: New research on the attendance crisis in schools.

performance measure to better recognise the progress of students who enter school behind their peers.

Purpose

To raise expectations and improve outcomes for all children, including those with SEND, by combining high academic standards with greater recognition of student progress. The reforms aim to strengthen accountability for schools and colleges supporting students from different starting points while reinforcing the ambition that every child should have the opportunity to learn, achieve and make meaningful progress.

Key considerations

The proposed consultation on progress measures provides an opportunity to consider how progress is defined and recognised for children and young people with SEND. Key questions include whether new measures will capture the broader progress that enables autistic children and young people to participate and learn, and how they will evidence this *invisible progress*[24] in a way that parents, Ofsted, local authorities and children themselves can see, trust and act on. While the White Paper assumes that more inclusive mainstream schools and colleges will improve outcomes, successful implementation will likely depend on understanding the conditions that enable autistic children and young people to learn and achieve, rather than assuming that mainstream placement alone leads to better attainment.

Behaviour Strategy

Current position

The Government proposes a more preventative approach to behaviour through a package of reforms including a new Behaviour in Schools guidance, 90 RISE Attendance and Behaviour Hubs, strengthened requirements for parents to engage with their child's school, an updated exclusions framework, a bespoke evidence-based toolkit for teachers on behaviour and bullying, and updated statutory Suspension and Permanent Exclusion guidance (effective from 26 July 2026)[25].

Purpose

To promote calm, safe and inclusive learning environments by shifting behaviour policy towards earlier intervention, understanding underlying needs, stronger relationships and belonging, while maintaining high expectations and recognising that exclusion remains an appropriate sanction in some circumstances. The Government increasingly frames behaviour as something to understand, rather than simply control, emphasising the need to identify the root causes of behaviour,

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[24] NASS (12 June 2026). Invisible progress: Capturing what really changes for SEND learners.
[25] Department for Education (July 2026). Suspension and permanent exclusion from maintained schools, academies and pupil referral units in England, including pupil movement.

including where these may be associated with SEND. It also introduces a range of measures intended to make vulnerable students more visible within the system through improved monitoring and stronger accountability.

Key considerations

The White Paper provides relatively little guidance on the distinct factors that shape behaviour for autistic children and young people, or SEND students, or how behaviour policies should respond to those experiences. Successful implementation will likely depend on whether schools and colleges have the expertise, resources and flexibility to identify and address underlying needs, and whether behaviour policies recognise that behaviours of concern can arise from the interaction between students and their school or college environment, rather than the child alone. It will also be important to monitor how the updated exclusions framework, including new approaches to internal suspensions and safeguarding separation, is implemented in practice to ensure that greater flexibility does not inadvertently increase exclusionary practice or reduce safeguards for autistic children and young people. Finally, unlike the Attendance and Attainment Strategies, the Behaviour Strategy does not set clear national ambitions for reducing suspensions or exclusions, making it less clear how the success of these reforms will be measured.

Curriculum and Assessment

Current position

The Government proposes a package of curriculum and assessment reforms, including a refreshed National Curriculum, a new enrichment entitlement, and new guidance and resources to support curriculum adaptation (published by 2028).

Purpose

To enable all students to access the same broad, ambitious curriculum through adaptive teaching, evidence-informed practice and greater flexibility, while maintaining high expectations and preparing young people for adult life. The Government explicitly rejects the idea that inclusion requires lowering ambition, instead aiming to “raise the floor without lowering the ceiling”. It also broadens the purpose of education beyond academic attainment by placing greater emphasis on enrichment, digital and financial literacy, oracy, media literacy and preparation for adulthood as core elements of an inclusive curriculum.

Key considerations

Many of the practical tools needed to support curriculum adaptation remain to be developed. Key questions include what curriculum adaptation will involve in practice, how specialist expertise and lived experience will shape its development, and how it will align with the National Inclusion Standards and wider SEND reforms. While the Government places increasing emphasis on an inclusive curriculum, successful

implementation will also likely depend on ensuring teachers are equipped with inclusive pedagogical approaches that reflect how autistic children and young people learn and support meaningful progress for every learner.

Needs Assessments

Current position

The Government proposes replacing the current SEND tiers with three layers of support: Targeted, Targeted Plus and Specialist. Only those in the Specialist layer, with “the most complex needs”, will be eligible for an Education, Health and Care Plan.

There would be a new statutory Needs Assessment to determine the support children and young people receive under the three-tier system and whether they meet the new threshold of “complex needs” required for an Education, Health and Care Plan. At the time of writing, the detailed assessment framework and the definition of “complex needs” have not yet been published, though in practice this is expected to be tied to eligibility for Specialist Provision Packages. It is also not clear how eligibility for the Targeted or Targeted Plus layers will be defined and assessed.

Purpose

With the three-layer support system, the Government aims to improve early intervention, ensure support is tailored to individual needs, and reduce unnecessary escalation to Education, Health and Care Plans. The Government intends the new Education, Health and Care Plans’ Needs Assessment to replace the current statutory assessment process with a more consistent, person-centred approach that focuses on identifying the support a child or young person requires, rather than securing access to statutory provision.

Key considerations

The new threshold of “complex needs” for Education, Health and Care Plans will effectively replace the current legal test for statutory support, creating a new legal framework and overwriting previously established case law. Without clear national guidance, there is a significant risk of lasting uncertainty, inconsistent decision-making and regional variation. It is therefore crucial that any new threshold is clearly defined.

Respondents to our survey showed strong opposition to thresholds based on “the most complex needs”. More than three quarters of respondents disagreed that Education, Health and Care Plans should be limited by this threshold, while over 6 in 10 disagreed with using it to determine access to specialist provision.

Our survey also highlights a substantial mismatch between how “complex needs” may be defined within the system and how autistic young people and families

experience need in practice. While 43% of respondents said they or their child had a learning disability and one third described themselves or their child as at least partially non-speaking, two thirds of all respondents described their or their child's educational needs as "complex". Respondents repeatedly highlighted that complexity cannot be measured through academic attainment alone, with some autistic children and young people appearing to cope in school while experiencing severe distress, exhaustion or burnout outside of it.

The new needs assessment must therefore support a holistic understanding of each child or young person's strengths, differences and needs across the breadth of their educational experience. Assessments should capture areas particularly relevant to autistic children and young people, including sensory needs, social communication differences, emotional wellbeing and preparation for adulthood. They must also recognise "spiky profiles", intersecting needs, masking and changing presentations over time. Most importantly, they should consider the views of the child or young person and their family alongside input from professionals who know the child well across a range of contexts.

The reforms also raise important implementation questions about how the new Needs Assessment will operate in practice, including how children and young people will move between different levels of support over time. While the reforms envisage that needs may change and support should respond accordingly, at the time of writing, there is limited information about how decisions will be made, who will undertake assessments, what qualifications or training assessors will require, how consistency of decision-making will be achieved across England, how frequently eligibility will be reviewed, what quality assurance arrangements will be put in place, and how disagreements about assessment outcomes will be resolved.

As statutory support will depend on placement within the Specialist layer, transparent decision-making, consistent national implementation and clear routes for challenge will be essential to maintaining confidence in the new system, and there would be value in piloting and evaluating the new framework before national implementation. Meaningful involvement of autistic children and young people, families and professionals as the framework is developed, tested and refined will also be important to ensure it reflects lived experience, builds confidence in the process and identifies unintended consequences before implementation at national scale.

It is also important to note that assessment of need for the purposes of the Education, Health and Care Plan threshold does not replace the need for access to clinical assessment and diagnosis. In research commissioned by Ambitious about Autism26, autistic young people and their families consistently told us that diagnosis

[26] University of Birmingham and Ambitious about Autism (2026). A system at breaking point: Parent and carer experiences of autism assessment and diagnosis.

was important for understanding themselves, being understood by others and accessing practical support into adulthood. As the new needs assessment is developed, consideration should therefore be given to how SEND needs assessments and clinical assessment and diagnosis can work alongside one another, where appropriate, to provide a more complete understanding of need.

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

Current position

The Government proposes that EHCPs will be available only to children and young people within the new Specialist layer of support, replacing the current statutory threshold with a proposed "complex needs" threshold. Those who continue to receive an EHCP will retain statutory protections, with support based on nationally defined Specialist Provision Packages. The Government also proposes changing the review cycle so that EHCPs are reviewed at the end of each key stage until age 16, rather than annually, with annual reviews continuing thereafter until age 25. For children and young people receiving Education Otherwise Than at School (EOTAS), responsibility for securing provision would transfer from local authorities to the school or college named within the EHCP.[27]

Purpose

The reforms aim to reduce reliance on EHCPs while preserving statutory protection for those who it deems to require the highest level of support. The Government's ambition is that strengthened mainstream support will reduce the need for statutory plans by ensuring more children and young people receive appropriate support without requiring an EHCP. Children and young people supported through the Targeted and Targeted Plus layers will instead receive an Individual Support Plan, supported by the National Inclusion Standards, the National SEND Training Programme and, where appropriate, the Experts at Hand service.

Key considerations

Respondents to our survey described applying for an EHCP to secure support that had already been identified as necessary but was not being provided in practice – most commonly, basic provision such as access to a quiet space or support from a teaching assistant. More than half of respondents who had received an EHCP said it had improved their or their child's academic progress, behaviour at school, mental health, overall wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem. If schools and colleges are expected to provide this support without the need for an EHCP, they will need sufficient funding, workforce and accountability to do so consistently. Otherwise, there is a risk that more children and young people will be left without an effective safety net. We are also concerned by the proposed removal of annual reviews for

[27] Department for Education (2026). SEND reform: education otherwise than at school.

many EHCPs, which could leave more children and young people in the wrong provision for longer.

The proposed changes also raise important implementation questions about how the new EHCP system will operate alongside wider reforms. At the time of writing, there is limited information about how consistency of decision-making will be maintained across local authorities or how the quality and delivery of the new-style EHCPs will be monitored over time. Given that the content of EHCPs will become more closely linked to nationally defined Specialist Provision Packages, it will also be important to ensure plans continue to reflect each child or young person's individual circumstances rather than becoming increasingly standardised. Successful implementation will therefore likely depend on maintaining confidence that support continues to provide personalised, accountable and legally enforceable.

Individual Support Plans (ISPs)

Current position

The Government proposes introducing a statutory duty for schools, school-based nurseries and colleges to produce and regularly review a digital ISP for every child and young person with SEND. ISPs will be developed alongside children, young people, parents and carers, and will set out the day-to-day support the learner receives. At the time of writing, schools and colleges will have a legal duty to prepare and review ISPs, but no equivalent statutory duty to deliver the support described within them. ISPs will also fall outside the jurisdiction of the SEND Tribunal. Under the proposed three-layer system, ISPs will form the primary support mechanism for children and young people in the Targeted and Targeted Plus layers, while those in the Specialist layer will receive both an ISP and an EHCP.

Purpose

The Government has described ISPs as a “radical expansion in rights”[28] as they are for all children and young people with SEND rather than just the highest tier. The intention is for every child and young person with SEND to get the support they need, without having to wait for a formal diagnosis.

Key considerations

As currently proposed, the move from EHCPs to ISPs appears to reduce some of the legal protections currently available to many children and young people. While there is a legal duty for schools, school-based nurseries and colleges to produce and regularly review the ISP, there appears to be no legal duty to **deliver** ISPs, and they will not be within the scope of the SEND Tribunal. Furthermore, they do not appear

[28] Department for Education (2026). Radical expansion in rights for children with SEND.

to cover young adults aged 19—25 who receive other types of provision, such as supported internships.

Almost 8 in 10 of our 2026 survey respondents lacked confidence that schools would create accurate ISPs, while 86% were not confident that schools would deliver support even if not legally required to do so. When asked what would give them more confidence in ISPs, the two most commonly endorsed factors were accountability for delivering the support and legal protections to ensure support is delivered. This aligns with a new YouGov poll commissioned by Ambitious about Autism, which found that almost 9 in 10 SEND parents and carers believe schools should be legally required to provide the support outlined in the ISP.

Three-quarters of survey respondents who had agreed additional support in school without an EHCP said this had been difficult, while more than 4 in 10 said this support was rarely or never put in place. Indeed, a recent Teacher Tapp poll[29] found that more than half of schools already create individual plans for students with SEND – yet families are still often driven to pursue EHCPs by inconsistent or unreliable support outside of this framework. ISPs cannot simply replicate existing practice.

For families to trust ISPs, there must be clear accountability for who is responsible for writing, delivering, reviewing and overseeing plans, alongside effective routes for challenge and redress. Young people and families have made clear that accountability must exist at the level of the individual child, not only through wider inspection systems.

Schools and colleges and staff also need sufficient funding, capacity, time and expertise to develop and deliver meaningful ISPs. At present, schools are struggling to meet needs, with many already having to reduce teaching assistants or support staff due to lack of funding.[30] There is a particular risk of additional workload for special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) in producing and maintaining ISPs, which could thwart the Government's aim of a more strategic SENCO role.

The reforms also raise important implementation questions about how ISP will operate consistently across England. At the time of writing, there is limited information about whether a nationally standardised ISP template will be introduced, what minimum information every plan will be expected to include, how consistency and quality will be monitored across different schools and colleges, or whether ISPs will transfer seamlessly when children and young people move between schools, colleges or local authorities. There is also limited information about how health and social care professionals will contribute where appropriate, how plans will be updated when needs change between formal review points, or how the effectiveness of ISPs will be evaluated nationally. Given the central role that ISPs will play across

[29] SchoolsWeek, Lucas, R. (2026). Most schools already produce SEND plans, poll suggests.
[30] The Guardian, Weale, S. (2026) Schools forced to cut back on support for Send pupils in England, poll finds.

the reformed SEND system, establishing consistent national expectations for their content, implementation and review will be essential to ensuring they become a meaningful mechanism for coordinating support rather than a variable administrative process.

Specialist Provision Packages (SPPs)

Current position

The Government proposes introducing nationally defined SPPs to underpin EHCPs for children and young people within the new Specialist layer. This represents a significant change from the current system, with EHCPs mozving away from individually specified provision towards nationally defined packages of support. Children and young people with existing EHCPs who continue to meet the new threshold for statutory support will transition onto the new system as their plans are reviewed. EHCPs will specify the relevant SPPs, while an ISP will set out how support will be delivered on a day-to-day basis.

Before appointing its independent Expert Panel, the Government published an indicative list of seven SPP categories:[31]

- profound and multiple learning difficulties;
- significant executive function;
- complex executive function and communication;
- social and emotional development focused on externalising behaviour;
- social and emotional development focused on internalising behaviour;
- sensory impairment;
- physical disability.

The Government has also confirmed that children and young people may receive support from more than one package, although it has not yet explained how this will operate in practice. The Government intends SPPs to be linked to a nationally set costing framework, with further detail expected through a separate consultation.

Purpose

The Government hopes to end the “postcode lottery” for access to specialist provision by defining what should be available nationally. SPPs are intended to ensure consistent, evidence-based support is available across the country. The Government also aims to “establish a fairer, more predictable and cohort-based funding model” for specialist provision.

[31] Department for Education (2026). Specialist provision packages.

Key considerations

We would welcome further clarity over the SPPs content or governance. As currently proposed, several aspects of the draft SPP framework appear difficult to reconcile with the needs of many autistic children and young people:

- The only references to autism are under the two "social and emotional development" categories. Misinterpreting autistic distress as a social or emotional skills deficit can lead to inappropriate interventions, increased harm, and reduced access to effective support.
- Many autistic people present with a mix of internalising and externalising behaviours, often in response to stress, anxiety or environmental barriers. Separating out internalising and externalising behaviour suggests a focus on outward presentation rather than underlying needs.
- Where there is a clinical mental health need, there is little clarity on how this would be included in EHCPs as legally required, as the proposed SPPs focus on educational provision.
- Sensory processing needs, common in autistic people and often critical to their wellbeing, are mentioned only in categories describing learning disabilities.
- Executive functioning typically describes higher-order cognitive functions some neurodivergent people find difficult, such as switching tasks, but the draft SPP conflates this with severe learning disability.
- SPPs describing learning disabilities do not differentiate between the needs of autistic and non-autistic people with learning disabilities.
- The diagnostic criteria for autism require areas of need across multiple domains – so most autistic children and young people would have needs across almost all the draft SPPs.

A total of 65% of our survey respondents disagreed that standardised specialist support packages could meet the needs of autistic children and young people. Respondents repeatedly emphasised that every autistic children and young person's needs are different. Pupils who need specialist provision have typically already tried more standardised support and found it has not worked well for them. Routes to specialist support must allow for individual provision.

There is still limited clarity around the governance, independence and accountability of the panel overseeing SPPs. A system where SPPs could be changed at any time without consultation or legislative scrutiny puts SEND provision at risk from future political or funding pressures. We would welcome more detail on the extent to which Parliament can scrutinise changes.

The effectiveness of any model depends on how it is funded and resourced, so we urge the Government to clarify the costing framework as soon as possible. The new

framework has major implications for specialist schools and colleges in particular, where it could in effect amount to funding bands. We recognise concerns that, without appropriate safeguards, future funding pressures could create incentives for the framework to be used primarily to manage costs rather than reflect need.

Per-pupil place funding for state-funded special schools has been frozen at £10,000 for 13 years. Addressing this chronic underfunding is vital to reducing reliance on unpredictable top-up funding and expensive out-of-area transport. Recruitment and retention of staff have been longstanding difficulties for the sector,[32] yet there is still no central forecast of these workforce shortages. We would welcome more detail on the wider funding model for specialist provision, including how local sufficiency, demand and cohort funding will be assessed and adjusted over time.

The long-term effectiveness of SPPs will also likely depend on how they are reviewed and updated over time. At the time of writing, there is limited information about how frequently the packages will be reviewed, who will be responsible for proposing changes, how emerging evidence and best practice will be incorporated, or what mechanisms will exist to ensure the framework continues to reflect the needs of children and young people as understanding evolves. Greater clarity will also be needed on how autistic children and young people, families, practitioners and specialist providers will be involved in evaluating and refining the packages, and what parliamentary scrutiny or public consultation will apply where significant changes are proposed. Given that SPPs will define statutory support for many children and young people, establishing transparent governance and regular review arrangements will be essential to maintaining confidence that the framework remains evidence-based, responsive and fit for purpose over time.

Choice of setting

Current position

The Government proposes retaining every child's right to a mainstream education where this is their family's preference, subject to the existing statutory exceptions. However, it also proposes significant changes to how schools and colleges are identified and how parental preference will be considered for children and young people receiving SPPs. Under the proposals, local authorities will provide families with a list of schools and colleges considered able to deliver the relevant SPPs. Families will continue to be able to express a preference for a school or college outside this list, although for some SPPs this will be limited to mainstream schools and colleges. Local authorities will then make placement decisions by balancing

[32] Lucas, Classick, Skipp, & Julius. (2023). Cost of Living Crisis: Impact on Schools. National Foundation for Educational Research.

parental preference against evidence of effectiveness, value for money and the needs of other children and young people.

The Government also proposes amending the existing exceptions under Section 39 of the Children and Families Act 2014. Local authorities would be able to refuse a placement where it would not represent an efficient use of resources, taking greater account of value for money and fairness across the wider system. They would also be able to refuse placements where a school or college is full or where admission would have a seriously detrimental effect on existing learners.

Purpose

The Government intends these changes to support a more planned, equitable and sustainable approach to specialist placements by strengthening local authorities' ability to balance individual preferences with wider system capacity. The proposals aim to ensure children and young people are placed in schools and colleges capable of delivering the relevant SPPs while supporting more consistent commissioning and reducing reliance on high-cost or out-of-area placements.

Key considerations

The local offer should not become a legal limit on meeting need. Autistic children who require regional or national specialist provision must be able to access it. Any lists must be tailored to the individual, not based on broad assumptions of need or generic ideals for location and costs. Poorly matched placements risk harmful and costly placement breakdowns.

Families must be able to trust that advice is impartial and based on need. Local authorities should therefore be able to discuss all options openly and fairly.

A total of 65% of our survey respondents disagreed with reducing the weight given to parental preference of school for a child with an EHCP. We are also concerned that with local authorities expected to plan for reforms before they are finalised, these changes may be interpreted inconsistently. In particular, with state special schools already too full, and no plans for additional capacity, allowing local authorities to reject placements on that basis could create a risk of more frequent refusal where specialist capacity remains constrained.

SEND Tribunal

Current position

The Government proposes retaining the SEND Tribunal as an independent route of appeal for some decisions relating to EHCPs and SPPs, while reducing its remit in several areas. Under the proposals, ISPs will not fall within the Tribunal’s jurisdiction, meaning disputes relating to their content or delivery will instead be managed

through school or college complaints procedures. The Government also proposes removing Tribunal appeals relating specifically to EOTAS provision.[33]

Where the Tribunal disagrees with a local authority's placement decision, it will no longer directly name the school or college but instead quash the decision and require the local authority to reconsider it. Families will be expected to consider strengthened mediation before pursuing Tribunal appeals, with mediation remaining independent but commissioned by local authorities.

Purpose

The Government intends these changes to reduce conflict within the SEND system by resolving disagreements earlier, strengthening local dispute resolution and reducing reliance on formal legal processes. Alongside improvements to mainstream support, mediation and the wider reforms, the proposals aim to create a less adversarial system while retaining Tribunal oversight for the most significant statutory decisions.

Key considerations

Our survey highlighted a theme of families having to escalate concerns simply to secure support that had already been identified as necessary, and it is this that is driving conflict, not families. Respondents described Tribunal routes as exhausting and adversarial, but the only mechanisms that resulted in support being delivered.

Schools and colleges could face a substantial increase in complaints relating to ISPs – creating greater workload and damaging the home-to-school relationship. Schools and colleges will be expected to make decisions about which layer of support a student receives without clear definitions and may not have the resource to provide the support they are being held accountable for. With no other effective routes available, those who can afford it may be pushed towards more complex and costly legal action including judicial review. In our 2026 survey, more than 8 in 10 respondents lacked confidence that concerns could be resolved through school complaints processes. Of those who had experienced the school complaints processes, almost half (45%) found this to be ineffective. Similarly, one thirds of those who had tried mediation with local authorities found this to be ineffective. The SEND Tribunal was viewed more positively, with just 14% finding this ineffective.

We are particularly concerned that Tribunals may no longer be able to name a placement. This risks unnecessary circular litigation where local authorities repeatedly make inappropriate placements, further eroding trust. The proposed changes to the SEND Tribunal also raise important questions about how their impact will be monitored and evaluated over time. Greater clarity will be needed on how complaints, mediation outcomes, Tribunal appeals, judicial reviews and family

[33] Department for Education (2026). SEND reform: education otherwise than at school.

experiences will be monitored across the reformed system, and how this evidence will inform future policy development. Given that the reforms seek to replace legal safeguards with greater confidence in earlier support, ongoing evaluation will be essential to demonstrate whether these changes are reducing conflict or simply shifting disputes into different parts of the system.

Inclusive Mainstream Fund (IMF)

Current position

The Government will invest **£1.6 billion over three years** through a new IMF, providing additional funding directly to mainstream schools and colleges to strengthen inclusive practice. The fund aims to enable earlier support without requiring diagnosis or statutory assessment, strengthen universal provision and give schools and colleges greater responsibility for identifying and responding to need. Schools will also be required to publish an Inclusion Strategy.

Purpose

Mainstream schools and colleges currently receive funding to support students with SEND through their core budgets, with additional support often accessed through local authority high needs funding following formal assessment. The Government argues this model is too dependent on statutory processes, escalating need and inconsistent local arrangements, resulting in support often arriving too late. Accompanying non-statutory guidance[34] positions the IMF primarily as **implementation funding**, helping schools and colleges redesign inclusive practice and prepare for wider SEND reforms, rather than permanently funding additional provision.

Key considerations

While the funding will not be distributed equally, the headline investment equates to an average of around £10,000–£11,000 per school or college each year, and only for three years. This raises important questions about what can realistically be achieved through a time-limited investment of this scale. The guidance makes clear that the IMF is intended to help schools and colleges redesign how they identify need, plan provision and embed inclusive practice, rather than fund ongoing support. However, many of these ambitions require sustained investment rather than one-off implementation. Building staff expertise is a continuous process as workforces change and evidence develops. Planning provision requires confidence that support can be maintained over time. This creates a tension at the heart of the policy. The guidance positions the IMF as a catalyst for long-term change, but the funding itself is temporary. It therefore remains unclear which elements of the reforms the Government expects schools and colleges to sustain through existing budgets once

[34] Department for Education (25 June 2026). Inclusive mainstream fund: best practice for schools.

the three-year investment ends, and how this aligns with its longer-term proposal to rebalance SEND funding. Until that wider funding model is fully explained, it is difficult to assess whether the IMF can deliver the transformational change it is intended to support.

National Funding Formula (NFF)

Current position

The Government is proposing, from 2029 onwards, to move to a fully direct NFF, meaning mainstream school or college funding would no longer be distributed through local authorities' individual funding formulae. At the same time, it proposes replacing the current notional SEND budget with a transparent inclusion allocation within each school or college's core budget. While the Government will review the design and operation of the funding system during implementation, it is not proposing to change the proxy indicators used to distribute mainstream funding, which continue to be based primarily on factors such as lower prior attainment and deprivation.

Purpose

The reform aims to strengthen accountability and expectations around mainstream inclusion by making the funding intended to support SEND more transparent and applying a single national funding formula across England. The Government argues this will improve fairness, reduce local variation, increase consistency, and support delivery of the wider SEND reforms.

Key considerations

This proposal is primarily about changing how mainstream funding is distributed, identified and used, rather than increasing the overall level of core school or college funding. It remains unclear whether the existing level of funding will be sufficient to deliver the expanded responsibilities expected of mainstream schools and colleges, particularly once the temporary IMF comes to an end.

The Government is also proposing to retain the existing proxy indicators despite significantly broadening the outcomes that mainstream funding is expected to support, extending beyond academic attainment to include belonging, safety, relationships and inclusion. This question is particularly relevant for autistic children and young people. Autism is not synonymous with deprivation or low prior attainment, and many autistic children and young people experience significant barriers to participation, communication, sensory regulation or wellbeing while achieving at or above expected academic levels. The Government should consider whether the existing proxy indicators reflect where resources are most needed.

The proposed funding formula does not use identified SEND as a funding factor. However, where resources remain constrained, schools, colleges, and families may

continue to rely on whichever evidence best demonstrates that additional support is needed. Any reduction in incentives to pursue statutory processes will therefore likely depend on whether mainstream schools and colleges have sufficient resources to provide effective support before children reach any threshold for additional funding.

Local SEND Inclusion Formula

Current position

As part of the Government's wider funding reforms, it is consulting[35] on allowing local authorities to transfer a proportion of High Needs funding directly into mainstream school or college budgets through a Local SEND Inclusion Formula. Initially introduced through voluntary pilots from 2027–28, the proposal is intended to inform wider national funding reforms expected from 2029–30. Each participating local authority would develop, in consultation with schools and colleges, its own Local SEND Inclusion Formula, determining features such as the threshold below which schools and colleges are expected to meet SEND costs from their own budgets, how much funding is transferred into mainstream schools and colleges, the local indicators used to distribute funding, and whether additional funding is available for schools and colleges with particularly high levels of SEND or complex need. The proposal encourages schools and colleges to plan provision around groups of students with "commonly occurring needs".

Purpose

At present, additional High Needs funding is accessed by mainstream schools and colleges through local authority High Needs budgets, often via top-up funding or local funding mechanisms linked to identified levels of need. The proposal aims to shift a proportion of this funding into mainstream school and college budgets upfront, enabling schools and colleges to provide earlier support without relying on statutory processes or additional funding applications. Over time, the Government intends this approach to support a wider move towards prevention, earlier intervention and greater mainstream inclusion.

Key considerations

This proposal redistributes existing High Needs funding into mainstream school and college budgets rather than introducing new investment. Its success therefore likely depends on mainstream schools and colleges being able to use this funding to provide effective early intervention that prevents needs from escalating. In practice, this requires schools and colleges to accurately anticipate demand, understand the types of support students will require, organise staffing accordingly, and have access

[35] Department for Education (2026) Upfront funding for mainstream schools: creating a 'local SEND inclusion formula' – what parents and carers of children and young people need to know.

to the expertise, specialist advice, leadership capacity and wider resources needed to intervene early. It also assumes that funding intended for SEND will remain available for that purpose despite wider financial pressures. If these conditions are not met, there is a risk that the same levels of need will persist while less funding remains available to meet them through the High Needs system.

The proposal also encourages schools and colleges to plan provision around groups of students with “commonly occurring needs”. While this may support more proactive planning, it risks overlooking students whose needs do not fit predictable patterns or standardised models of support. This is particularly relevant for autistic children and young people, whose needs often vary significantly between individuals and may change over time. Earlier intervention should not come at the expense of personalised support.

The relationship between this proposal and specialist provision also requires greater clarity. High Needs funding supports not only top-up funding for mainstream schools and colleges, but also specialist placements, alternative provision and a range of specialist services. Strengthening mainstream inclusion should therefore not come at the expense of maintaining sustainable specialist provision for children and young people who continue to require it. Reform should instead ensure a coherent and properly resourced continuum of provision across both mainstream and specialist schools and colleges.

As implementation progresses, robust evaluation will be essential to determine whether the reforms are improving outcomes for children and young people while maintaining sufficient capacity across the wider SEND system.

High needs capital funding

Current position

The Government has committed at least £3.7 billion of additional High Needs capital funding between 2026–27 and 2029–30[36], although only the first annual allocation (£860 million for 2026–27) has been published to date. The funding is allocated to local authorities, which must enter a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department for Education setting out a number of assurance requirements. For the 2026–27 allocation, each local authority was required to produce a Local SEND Reform Plan, explaining the projects it intends to deliver, why they are needed, how they support the SEND reforms, and how they will increase mainstream inclusion. Local authorities wishing to use the funding to expand special schools, colleges, or alternative provision places must provide an evidence-based rationale for why needs cannot instead be met in mainstream schools and colleges.

[36] Department for Education (25 March 2026). High needs provision capital allocations: Guidance, GOV.UK,.

Authorities must also submit annual monitoring returns detailing projects, expected new places, adaptations, and committed and uncommitted funding, although they are encouraged rather than required to publish this information locally. Once projects are completed, authorities must also report their actual capital expenditure through the national Capital Spend Survey.

Purpose

The funding aims to increase the capacity of the education system to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND by supporting local authorities to expand and improve provision. Allocated directly to local authorities, it can be invested in projects such as expanding special schools and colleges, creating Inclusion Bases, adapting mainstream schools and colleges to improve accessibility and inclusion, and developing alternative provision where needed. The programme is intended to support both the creation of additional specialist places and the wider ambition of enabling more children and young people to succeed in mainstream education where appropriate.

The programme also places a strong emphasis on increasing mainstream inclusion. This creates a clear expectation that investment should first be directed towards strengthening mainstream provision wherever possible.

Key considerations

The success of this approach will likely depend on ensuring that efforts to increase mainstream capacity are balanced with continued investment in specialist provision for children and young people whose needs continue to require it. A strong emphasis on mainstream expansion should not unintentionally reduce investment in specialist capacity before wider reforms have demonstrated that demand has genuinely changed.

Monitoring arrangements also focus primarily on implementation rather than outcomes. Local authorities are required to report on how funding has been allocated, the projects delivered and the additional places created. However, there is much less emphasis on evaluating whether these investments improve educational outcomes, such as increasing successful inclusion, reducing exclusions or absence, improving participation and wellbeing, or changing demand for specialist provision. While future funding decisions will be informed by evidence of progress towards the programme's objectives, there is not yet a clear national outcomes framework against which the educational impact of these investments will be assessed.

Finally, there remains uncertainty about the longer-term capital programme. Although the Government has committed at least £3.7 billion between 2026–27 and 2029–30, only the first annual allocation has been published, leaving the profile of the remaining investment unclear. There is also no commitment beyond 2029–30. This uncertainty may affect long-term strategic planning, particularly where local

authorities are considering projects with significant ongoing implications for the balance of mainstream and specialist provision.

Inclusive Education Estates

Current position

Alongside the High Needs Provision Capital programme, the Government has published Inclusive Education Estates guidance[37] to support local authorities that choose to use their capital funding to adapt mainstream schools and colleges, and improve accessibility and inclusion. The guidance is non-statutory and sets out principles for designing learning environments that better support children and young people with SEND.

Purpose

The guidance aims to help schools and colleges create learning environments that proactively reduce barriers to participation, learning and wellbeing. It reflects the wider preventative approach underpinning the SEND reforms by promoting inclusive design as part of everyday school and college environments, rather than reserving accessible and adaptable spaces solely for specialist provision. Features such as layout, acoustics, lighting and flexible learning spaces are intended to support participation, learning and wellbeing across the whole school and college community while better meeting the needs of children and young people with SEND.

Key considerations

The guidance marks a positive shift in how accessibility is understood within schools and colleges. It explicitly recognises neurodivergence, sensory environments and flexible learning spaces, moving beyond traditional approaches focused primarily on physical accessibility. It also encourages a more proactive approach through anticipatory accessibility audits, lifecycle planning, identifying underused spaces, reviewing impact and designing environments that can adapt to a range of needs over time.

However, successful implementation likely depends on schools, colleges, and local authorities having the capacity and expertise to carry out these activities. The guidance assumes schools and colleges have sufficient time, leadership capacity, multidisciplinary expertise and specialist advice to assess their environments, prioritise improvements and evaluate their impact. It is still unclear how children and young people with SEND should be involved in identifying barriers, shaping design decisions or evaluating whether changes have improved their experience. If inclusive

[37] Department for Education (25 June 2026). Inclusive education estates: Supporting inclusive environments in mainstream settings.

environments are intended to reflect the needs of those who use them, meaningful co-production will be an important part of successful implementation.

The level of ambition also raises important questions. Much of the guidance focuses on relatively low-cost adaptations, such as improved signage, decluttering, lighting, furniture, quieter dining areas, planting, ventilation, toilet facilities and outdoor spaces. While these changes can make a meaningful difference, the guidance provides less clarity on when more substantial investment or major rebuilding projects may be required to achieve genuinely inclusive environments. Given the significant variation in the age, condition and design of school and college estates, it remains unclear whether smaller-scale adaptations alone will be sufficient to deliver the Government's wider ambitions.

Inclusive physical environments are fundamental to the Government's wider ambition of enabling more children and young people with SEND, particularly many autistic children and young people, to succeed in mainstream education. The combination of non-statutory guidance, locally determined investment decisions and no capital funding commitment beyond 2029–30 means further evidence will be needed to understand whether this model can be delivered consistently across different local contexts. The success of the guidance will therefore likely depend on whether sufficient long-term investment, local prioritisation and accountability are in place to make inclusive environments a consistent feature of mainstream education rather than an aspiration achieved only in some areas.

Inclusion Bases

Current position

The Government has published guidance on Inclusion Bases[38], supported by the High Needs Provision Capital programme, setting out a model of specialist provision within mainstream schools and six principles for effective practice. The guidance describes two types of Inclusion Base: Support Bases, funded by schools to provide support within the Targeted Plus layer, and Specialist Bases, funded by local authorities to support students within the Specialist layer. Both are intended to operate along a continuum, with students spending varying amounts of time in the base and mainstream classrooms according to their individual needs. Inclusion Bases will form part of Ofsted's consideration of how schools support students with SEND, and the guidance provides a range of non-statutory approaches for schools, trusts and local authorities to monitor and evaluate their effectiveness.

Purpose

The Government's aim is to increase access to specialist support within mainstream education by creating consistent, high-quality provision that combines mainstream

[38] Department for Education (25 June 2026). Inclusion Bases in schools.

participation with bespoke environments, specialist expertise and tailored support. The intention is to enable more children and young people to attend their local mainstream school while accessing the level of support they require, reducing the need for separate specialist placements where appropriate. The guidance places significant emphasis on ensuring that specialist support does not come at the expense of educational quality, with Inclusion Bases expected to provide ambitious teaching, robust assessment, curriculum continuity and carefully planned participation in mainstream school life alongside specialist interventions.

Key considerations

Primarily, many of the key features of the proposed model remain under development. The guidance adopts a broad definition of Inclusion Bases, confirms that further detail on the Support Base and Specialist Base model will follow consultation, and repeatedly refers to evidence-based approaches without setting out the evidence informing its recommendations. At the same time, it places significant responsibility on schools and local authorities to develop strategic plans covering target cohorts, staffing models, curriculum access, progression routes, projected outcomes and school selection processes, despite providing limited operational guidance on how these decisions should be made.

The guidance also leaves several important practical questions unanswered. These include how Inclusion Bases will support students with conflicting sensory, communication and regulation needs within shared environments, how staffing models will respond to highly individual presentations, and how schools will ensure that bases remain educational settings rather than behaviour-management spaces or “holding areas” for students whose needs are not being met elsewhere.

There also remains a significant gap between the ambition of the proposal and the conditions currently in place to deliver it. Successful implementation likely depends on schools and local authorities having the expertise, specialist workforce and leadership capacity to establish and sustain high-quality Inclusion Bases. However, the Government's own research suggests this capability is not yet consistently in place. Even among parents reporting positive experiences[39], some felt a special school would have been more appropriate for their child. Around half of parents reported that their child did not feel included as part of the wider school community, while experiences of unsuccessful bases highlighted risks including school-based trauma and deteriorating mental health.

These findings, combined with the non-statutory nature of the guidance, locally determined investment decisions, the absence of any capital funding commitment beyond 2029–30, and the fact that key elements of the model and its evidence base remain under development, it is therefore not yet clear how consistently this model

[39] Department for Education (25 June 2026). SEN units and resourced provision: insights from expert interviews.

can be delivered nationally. If Inclusion Bases are intended to become a key mechanism for enabling more autistic children and young people to succeed in mainstream education, greater certainty will be needed that this provision will be available and delivered to a consistently high standard.

Our Youth-Led Frameworks highlights several areas where autistic young people identified additional considerations for successful Inclusion Bases that could be relevant going forward. These include ensuring support is adapted to the individual, increasing student agency, promoting belonging within the wider school community, establishing the right foundations for success, and involving autistic young people throughout design, implementation and evaluation. Young people also questioned models in which students spend most of their time within Specialist Bases, raising broader questions about how these differ from specialist schools and what evidence supports this approach. Their experiences consistently emphasised that while bases may benefit some students, they cannot meet the full range of SEND needs and should not be viewed as a substitute for specialist provision or for wider improvements to mainstream inclusion.

National SEND Training Programme

Current position

The Government proposes a National SEND Training Programme[40], backed by more than £200 million over three years, for all staff working across early years, schools and colleges. Alongside this, it proposes reforms to initial teacher education, National Professional Qualifications, and new conditions attached to Intensive Training and Practice grant funding[41].

As part of this investment, £2 million has been awarded to the Ambition Institute to design and develop a suite of online and downloadable professional development resources[42]. These materials will be published in three phases: September 2026, covering the proposed SEND reforms, the Government's vision for inclusion and planning professional development; December 2026; and Spring 2027, with later phases focusing on pedagogy, creating inclusive environments and working with parents. The resources are expected to be tailored for early years, primary, secondary and post-16 settings.

From autumn 2027, these resources will be complemented by new Inclusive Education training courses, combining online self-study with live facilitated learning. The revised SEND Code of Practice is expected to require all schools and colleges to ensure staff receive training on SEND and inclusion, while the National Inclusion

[40] Department for Education (16 January 2026). £200 million landmark SEND teacher training programme.
[41] TES magazine, Turner, C. (23 july 2026). ITAP teacher training funding now conditional on SEND content.
[42] SchoolsWeek, Chantler-Hicks, L. (23 July 2026). Promised SEND training courses set to start autumn 2027.

Standards and accompanying evidence library will provide a common evidence base to underpin training and practice.

Purpose

The Government states that these reforms will equip education staff with the knowledge, skills and confidence to support children and young people with SEND throughout their education. By embedding SEND and inclusion across teacher training, professional development and leadership, the programme aims to build a more confident workforce that can identify needs earlier, deliver high-quality inclusive practice and reduce reliance on specialist intervention.

Key considerations

The National SEND Training Programme is the mechanism through which many of the other reforms are expected to succeed. Many of the proposals assume education staff will be able to identify needs earlier, determine appropriate support, implement reasonable adjustments consistently and create more inclusive learning environments. Without significantly increasing the knowledge and confidence of education staff in supporting autistic children and young people and those with SEND, many of the wider reforms may struggle to achieve their intended impact. Yet there remains a significant gap between the ambition of the programme and the conditions currently in place to deliver it.

At the time of writing, the National SEND Training Programme is still being developed. Professional development resources are due to be released in phases until Spring 2027, with facilitated training expected to begin in autumn 2027. The Department for Education has not yet appointed a provider to deliver the programme, while the National Inclusion Standards and revised SEND Code of Practice that are intended to underpin the training have yet to be published. This leaves a relatively short period for schools and colleges across England to engage with the programme before they are expected to implement many of the wider reforms, including new approaches to inclusion planning, early identification, planning support and meeting renewed expectations.

Even once developed, it remains unclear whether the programme will be piloted, evaluated or refined before being implemented at national scale. There is currently no published evidence on how consistently the programme can be delivered nationally, demonstrating that the programme will improve professional confidence and practice, or if that improvement will result in better outcomes for children and young people.

Questions also remain about how the Government’s commitment of more than £200 million over three years will be used. There is currently little public information about how funding will be allocated between resource development, facilitated delivery, staff release time, backfill funding, regional delivery arrangements or longer-term

programme maintenance. Similarly, no longer-term funding or strategy has yet been set out to support the ongoing review, updating and development of the programme beyond the initial investment. As the Association of School and College Leaders has observed[43], delivering high-quality professional development to hundreds of thousands of education staff is a substantial undertaking and building workforce expertise in SEND is not a one-off exercise, but an ongoing process of professional learning that requires sustained investment over time.

Moreover, while the revised SEND Code of Practice is expected to require schools and colleges to ensure staff receive SEND and inclusion training, participation in the National SEND Training Programme itself does not currently appear to be mandatory. This provides schools and colleges with flexibility over how they meet these expectations but also creates uncertainty about how consistently the programme will be adopted. Implementation will therefore likely depend not only on the quality of the training itself, but also on schools and colleges' capacity to release staff, competing workload pressures, local decisions about professional development, and whether the Government has sufficient oversight to understand uptake and evaluate whether the programme is leading to improvements in practice across the education system.

The success of the programme will also likely depend on whether it develops the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to deliver the Government's wider reforms in practice. At the time of writing, there is little public information about how autistic children and young people, families or people with lived experience of SEND will be involved in designing, testing, delivering and evaluating the programme. Given the central role that workforce expertise plays in the Government's ambition for a more inclusive mainstream system, meaningful involvement of those with lived experience could help ensure the programme reflects the practical realities of inclusion and the everyday experiences of children and young people themselves.

Information published so far suggests that the programme will place significant emphasis on adaptive teaching, inclusive practice and removing barriers to learning. These are important foundations. However, successful implementation will also likely depend on ensuring staff develop sufficient understanding of common conditions, including autism, so that needs such as sensory differences, executive functioning differences, masking, anxiety and communication differences are recognised and responded to appropriately.

Evidence from autistic young people throughout this report also suggests that successful inclusion depends on more than effective classroom teaching alone. Young people consistently described the importance of staff demonstrating empathy, flexibility, understanding, respectful communication, genuine listening and a

[43] Association of School and College Leaders (16 January 2026). ASCL comment on £200m SEND training programme.

willingness to make reasonable adjustments. For many, feeling safe, understood and able to participate depended as much on relationships, school and college culture, and everyday interactions as on pedagogy itself. If the programme is intended to prepare staff for a more inclusive education system, it will therefore need to develop not only teaching practice, but also the wider interpersonal and professional skills that enable autistic children and young people to feel respected, included and able to thrive.

Experts at Hand

Current position

The Government proposes investing £1.8 billion over three years to establish a new national Experts at Hand service[44], supported by a further £200 million Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund intended to prepare local systems for reform. Through the service, local authorities and Integrated Care Boards will jointly commission specialist education and health professionals, including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other specialist practitioners, and make their expertise available to mainstream schools and colleges through the Targeted Plus layer of support.

According to recently published guidance[45] [46], the service is intended primarily to provide whole-setting support, including workforce development, advice to education staff, and group- or cohort-based interventions designed to strengthen inclusive practice across schools and colleges. Limited individual input may be provided where group delivery is impractical because of geography or where a child or young person has particularly specific needs, and specialists may observe individual students or advise staff on appropriate support. However, sustained one-to-one intervention, statutory assessment for an EHCP, and provision already specified within an EHCP are explicitly outside the scope of the programme.

While the national policy sets out the overall ambition, funding and minimum expectations, each local area is responsible for determining how the service will operate locally. Local SEND Reform Plans will therefore act as the primary mechanism through which local authorities and Integrated Care Boards design, implement and monitor their local Experts at Hand offer.

Purpose

The Government's ambition is to move from isolated examples of effective collaboration between mainstream and specialist schools and colleges towards a nationally commissioned and more consistent partnership model. Rather than

[44] Department for Education (5 June 20260. Local areas prepare new Experts at Hand teams.
[45] Department for Education (5 June 2026). Developing and delivering the Experts at Hand offer in year 1: supporting guidance.
[46] Department for Education (15 April 2026). Experts at Hand & Local Authority SEND Transformation Fund.

replacing statutory services, Experts at Hand is intended to strengthen mainstream capacity by making specialist expertise available earlier and more consistently. Through whole-setting advice, workforce development and group-based support, the programme aims to improve inclusive practice, enable education staff to identify and respond to needs more effectively, and strengthen early intervention. In doing so, the Government intends to reduce unnecessary escalation to more intensive or statutory support, while preserving separate pathways for sustained individual intervention and legally mandated provision where these remain necessary.

Key considerations

The publication of the first-year guidance provides greater clarity about the intended role of Experts at Hand and reveals a considerably narrower model than the headline ambition of "wrapping professionals around mainstream schools" might initially suggest. Rather than providing sustained individual specialist support, the programme is primarily designed to strengthen workforce expertise and inclusive practice through advice, consultation and group-based interventions. The model therefore assumes that many children and young people will benefit indirectly through better-equipped education staff, rather than through ongoing direct input from specialist professionals.

However, the evidence underpinning this approach remains relatively limited. The guidance draws heavily on learning from the Partnerships for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools programme, although some organisations have questioned the strength and transferability of the available evidence. As the programme expands nationally, transparency about the evidence base, robust evaluation focused on outcomes, and ongoing review and refinement will be essential to demonstrate effectiveness, build confidence across the sector and ensure the model delivers consistently for children and young people.

The guidance is clear that Experts at Hand funding should expand specialist capacity rather than replace existing statutory provision, established specialist pathways or support that schools and colleges are already expected to provide. However, maintaining this distinction may prove difficult where specialist services are already under significant pressure. The programme assumes a substantial expansion in the availability of educational psychologists, therapists, specialist teachers and other professionals, yet relatively little information has been published about how this workforce will be recruited, trained and retained at the scale required[47]. Without clear baselines, transparent reporting, robust evaluation and a comprehensive workforce strategy, there is a risk that existing activity could simply be rebadged as Experts at Hand or that new funding could be used to fill existing workforce shortages rather than genuinely expanding overall capacity.

[47] NASS (29 July 2026). The experts are at hand – but where are they coming from?

Finally, while Experts at Hand is intended to strengthen mainstream inclusion, the model also raises important questions about the role of specialist schools and colleges within the wider system and the experience of children and young people who rely on specialist support. Mainstream early years settings, schools and colleges are the primary recipients of the additional professional capacity, while specialist schools, colleges and alternative provision are principally expected to contribute expertise through outreach. Yet specialist schools and colleges themselves continue to experience significant shortages in psychology, therapy and other specialist services. Assuming they already possess sufficient capacity to support mainstream education risks overlooking continuing workforce pressures within specialist provision.

At the same time, the programme cannot be used to fund EHCP assessments, provision already specified within an EHCP, or ongoing one-to-one specialist intervention that should be secured through statutory services. As a result, Experts at Hand does not directly address existing shortages within statutory specialist provision. Children and young people who require sustained individual support, including many with EHCPs or future SPPs while attending mainstream schools and colleges, will therefore continue to rely on existing commissioning arrangements and workforce capacity.

The specialist sector

Current position

The Government proposes that specialist schools and colleges will continue to provide education for children and young people whose needs cannot be met within the Targeted or Targeted Plus layers. Alongside their existing educational role, specialist schools and colleges will be expected to play a greater system leadership role through the new Experts at Hand programme. The Government intends specialist schools and colleges to provide outreach, specialist advice, workforce development and, where appropriate, short-term placements to support mainstream inclusion.

The Government has also confirmed that students already attending specialist schools and colleges when the reforms are introduced will be able to remain there until they complete their education unless they choose to move into mainstream provision.

Purpose

The Government want more children and young people with SEND to be educated in mainstream. They intend for specialist schools and colleges to remain an essential part of the SEND system for those with the most complex needs, while also sharing their expertise more widely to improve inclusion across mainstream education.

Through outreach and workforce development, specialist providers are expected to contribute to earlier intervention, strengthen local capacity and support more children and young people to thrive within mainstream schools and colleges where appropriate.

Key considerations

Educational provision should be based on enabling every child to access an education that fulfils their needs and aspirations – not just location. While mainstream can and should be more inclusive, there will always be some autistic children and young people who need a specialist offer.

As of May 2025, there were 11,000 more students on roll in state-funded and non-maintained special schools than reported capacity.[48] Many more are waiting for a place, with some left without education altogether. In light of this over-subscription, it is not clear how outreach will work in practice and how schools and colleges should plan for a stream of short-term, short-notice placements to minimise the impact on longer-term students.

Just over a third of our 2026 survey respondents told us they or their child have attended a specialist school. On average, the support received from special schools was rated as 8 out of 10, compared with less than 4 out of 10 for mainstream schools. The rate of lost learning from this group was around half that of respondents from mainstream schools.

Of those with experience of special schools, just 7% agreed that their needs could have been met equally in an Inclusion Base within a mainstream school – where buildings, curricula or staff ratios may constrain support available. More than three quarters told us their mental health, academic progress and preparation for the future would have been much worse without specialist provision.

Across all survey respondents, more than 9 in 10 disagreed that mainstream schools and colleges currently have the capacity to support more autistic children and young people to thrive in education. Almost three quarters disagree that more autistic children and young people in specialist provision could be supported in mainstream.

The success of the specialist sector within the reformed SEND system will ultimately depend not only on the number of specialist places available, but also on whether children and young people experience improved educational, social and wellbeing outcomes across both mainstream and specialist provision. As implementation progresses, ongoing evaluation will therefore be important to understand how demand for specialist placements changes over time, whether outreach is improving mainstream inclusion, and whether children and young people continue to access

[48] Department for Education (2026). Academic year 2024/25: School capacity.

specialist provision when it remains the most appropriate school or college for their needs.

Transitioning to a new system

We expect draft legislation to make its way through Parliament in the next few months. This is likely to take a long time. The Government hopes to introduce the new EHCP system in September 2029 – the same year that a General Election is due. If legislation passes before the election but an incoming government does not support the new system, there may be cuts to legal rights without the accompanying increase in mainstream support proposed by the current Government. Children and young people who already have EHCPs will not be moved to the new system until 2030, and then only when they move between phases in education.

We are particularly concerned about the timing of EHCP re-assessments, given that these transition points are already very difficult for many autistic children and young people. Where a child or young person with an existing EHCP still qualifies for an EHCP after re-assessment, they will receive a new one based on the SPPs that apply to them. This means that even those who retain their EHCPs may lose much of the individual content.

The Government expects that every child with an existing EHCP will also get an ISP before re-assessment, to ensure there is no break in support. The Government is currently consulting on how – if at all – children and young people currently receiving EOTAS provision should transition to the new system.

The wider system

The proposed SEND reforms have come alongside several other government initiatives that could significantly impact autistic people. The Department for Education's consultation ran at the same time as the review into the prevalence and diagnosis of mental health conditions, ADHD and autism reporting into the Department of Health and Social Care[49], as well as Alan Milburn's review into young people and work for the Department for Work and Pensions.[50]

We are concerned that the timing of these three projects will limit their ability to learn from and adapt to each other, and to consider the lives of autistic children and young people holistically. For example, with the proposed new areas of development removing "mental health" on the assumption that mental health support is a clinical issue, any restriction on access to clinical mental health support following the

[49] Department of Health and Social Care (2026). Independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism: interim report.
[50] Department for Work and Pensions (2026). Young people and work: interim report.

prevalence review could result in many more children and young people being left to reach a crisis.

Mental health

Autism is not a mental health condition, but autistic children experience disproportionately high levels of poor mental health.[51,52] Barriers within education, including inaccessible environments, sensory overload, bullying and pressure to mask autistic traits, can contribute significantly to this.

The Government has committed to rolling out Mental Health Support Teams in every school by 2030[53] – a welcome move. Alongside this, we are calling for the expansion of evidence-based mental health support models targeted towards autistic young people.

For example, our Autistic and OK programme equips schools to support autistic children and young people' wellbeing through peer-led sessions, teacher training and whole-school activities. According to the programme's 2025 impact report,[54] 82% of teachers surveyed improved their knowledge and confidence in supporting autistic children and young people, while 89% observed improved wellbeing amongst autistic children and young people who took part.

Assessment and diagnosis

As of March 2026, over 270,000 people were waiting for an autism assessment; this waiting list has trebled in the past four years.[55] The rise in referrals reflects several factors, including increased public awareness of autism, reduced stigma, broader diagnostic criteria and improved clinical understanding. Many who seek an autism diagnosis are struggling in their daily lives. A clinical diagnosis remains one of the only ways to unlock support in education, employment and beyond.

We know from our work with young people that, too often, it is only when a child reaches a crisis point that professionals around them will investigate whether autism could be the underlying cause. As a society we need to get better at supporting children and young people who experience the world differently, from their earliest years. Through our leadership role in the Autism Alliance, Ambitious about Autism is calling for urgent reform of the autism assessment system that advocates for reforms that make assessments more reliable, integrated, and tailored to autistic people's needs.

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[51] Simonoff et al. (2008) Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population-derived sample

[52] Crane et al. (2017). 'Know Your Normal' – mental health in young autistic adults.

[53] HM Treasury (2025). Spending Review 2025.

[54] Ambitious about Autism (2025). Autistic and OK: Programme impact report.

[55] NHS England (2026). Autism Statistics, April 2025 to March 2026.

Employment

Autistic people face the lowest employment rate of all disability groups,[56] and autistic young people are overrepresented in NEET cohorts.[57,58] The Milburn Review's interim report[59] identifies a range of risk factors that begin in school – including absence and exclusion, a curriculum too focused on exams and poor careers advice.

Almost 9 in 10 survey respondents were not confident that young people would be supported into adulthood without a legal requirement. Of those respondents who had (or whose child had) moved on from school, less than half felt supported in this transition. When asked what would have helped, the most commonly endorsed answers were support to prepare for the new environment, better co-ordination between services and support with social and communication needs.

Yet the proposals may reduce support for many young people just as they need it most. Many EHCPs, which can continue to age 25, would be replaced by ISPs that end when a young person leaves education. The Government must make arrangements to identify and meet the needs of this group, particularly in funding supported internships. Specialist Further Education (FE) settings play a key role in supporting outcomes including independence, higher education and employment. The Specialist layer should reflect specialist FE settings such as residential colleges, which are limited nationally and operate across local authority boundaries.

[56] Department for Work and Pensions (2026). The employment of disabled people 2025.
[57] Office for National Statistics. (2025) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: November 2025.
[58] Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions. (2026). Calendar year 2025: NEET age 16 to 24.
[59] Department for Work and Pensions (2026). Young people and work: interim report.