About this report

This report shares what autistic children and young people think about the Government's plans to change education for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

We worked with autistic young people over several months. They took part in seven workshops. They talked about:

- the Government's plans as a whole
- six important parts of the plans in more detail
- what they liked
- what they were worried about
- what they think needs to change

We also used our surveys, national polling, research, official information and what we have learned from support autistic children and young people in our schools and colleges.

Young people liked the Government's aim to make schools work better for everyone.
They want:

- children to get help earlier
- school staff to have the right training
- more autistic pupils to be able to learn, belong and thrive

But one message came through clearly: **The changes need to make life better for autistic children and young people.**

It is not enough for the Government to change the rules. Young people need to see a real difference in the support they get and their everyday lives.

What young people taught us

Autistic young people looked carefully at the Government's plans. They found problems with the plans and shared ideas about how to make them work better.

Three big messages came out of this:

1. **Every autistic child is different**

Young people told us that every autistic child is different.

Children can have different strengths, needs, preferences and ways of communicating.

They may also experience things like noise, lights or other things around them differently.

Young people want national rules to help make support more consistent. But they were worried that the same rules may not work for every child.

Support must be based on what each child needs.

2. **Plans must work in real life**

Young people told us that plans and promises only matter if children actually get the support they need.

They wanted to know:

- Who will provide the support?
- Will staff have the right knowledge and training?
- Will schools have enough money and staff to provide support?

There needs to be clear rules about who must provide support. There also needs to be a clear way to put things right when support does not happen.

3. Schools and colleges must change to include autistic pupils

The Government wants more children and young people with SEND to learn and thrive in mainstream education.

It has plans to give mainstream schools and colleges more support and help them make easier for children and young people with SEND to be there.

But young people asked two bigger questions:

- Is it enough for autistic young people to just be there?
- What needs to change about schools and colleges so that autistic children and young people can learn, take part and belong?

Schools and colleges should:

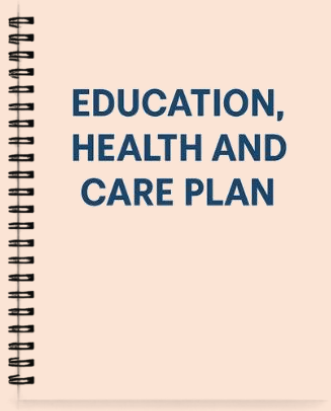
- See what they can change before expecting the pupil to change
- Be flexible and give pupils real choices about their support
- Accept that there are different ways to learn and do well

The message is clear: autistic pupils do not just need a way to fit into the old system. The school system must change around them.

What we think about the Governments plans

1. Autistic young people must help create change

Autistic children and young people should not just have changes made to their education. They should help make the changes. They should also help decide if the changes are working.



Around 1 in 3 Education, Health and Care Plans are for autistic children and young people.

Autistic children and young people are also more likely to:

1. miss school
2. be suspended
3. be excluded from school

If the changes do not work for autistic children and young people, they cannot be considered successful.

2. Changes must be tested before legal rights are reduced

The Government wants children to get support earlier and wants mainstream schools to be more inclusive.

We support these aims.

But the Government should not rush to make big changes while parts of the new system have not been tested.

Children and young people have legal rights that help protect them.

These rights should not be reduced until the new system is fully in place and there is independent evidence that it works.

3. **Mainstream schools must not replace personalised or specialist support**

Mainstream schools should become better at supporting autistic children and young people.

But this must not mean less personalised or specialist support.

National rules should help children get good support wherever they live.

But children should not be put into fixed groups or given the same support.

Mainstream and specialist education both need enough staff and resources.

Mainstream schools and colleges also need big changes to help more autistic children and young people do well.

The six tests young people made

Young people made six tests for the Government's changes.

The tests say the Government should:

1. Understand autistic young people as individuals

Every autistic child and young person is different.

Understand the whole person, including their strengths, needs, communication, senses, wellbeing and what they want for their future.

2. Adapt schools and colleges around them

Do not always expect autistic children and young people to change to fit into school or college.

Change things that make harder for them to learn, take part and belong.

3. Give them the support they need

Support should be based on what each child or young person needs.

It should not depend on which group they fit into, where they live or what support is easiest to provide.

4. **Work with them, not just for them**

Listen to autistic children and young people and believe what they say.

Help them understand their choices and give them a real say in decisions about their support

5. **Give schools and colleges what they need**

Schools need enough:

- staff
- training
- specialist help
- money
- suitable spaces

This will help schools make the changes work.

6. **Make support reliable and accountable**

Children and young people should be able to trust that the support they have been promised will happen.

If support does not happen or a decision is wrong, there should be a clear and independent way to put things right.

They used these ideas to make checklists for each part of the Government's plans.

These include:

- rules for making schools more inclusive
- ways to find out what help a child needs
- plans for the help each child should get
- specialist help for children who need it
- training for school staff
- special areas in schools where children can get extra help

Five things we think should guide the changes

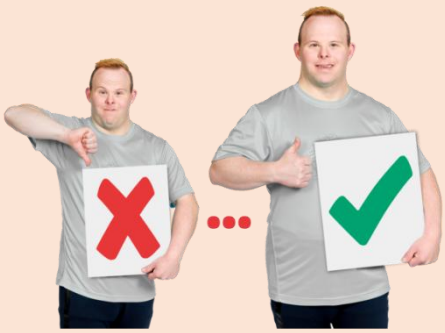
We looked at what autistic young people told us. We also looked at our research and what we have learned from helping children and young people.

We found **five things** that should guide the Government's changes:

1. Listen to autistic young people

Autistic children and young people should have a real say in decisions about their education.

Their experiences are important and should be listened to.



2. Check whether autistic young people's lives are getting better

The Government should listen to autistic young people and find out what their everyday lives are like.

It should use this to check if the changes are working.

3. Make schools work for everyone

Schools should remove things that make it harder for children to learn and take part.

Schools should understand that children learn and communicate in different ways.

4. Make sure people can trust the system

Children and young people should get the help they need when they need it.

If something goes wrong, there should be a clear way to fix it.

5. Invest in the changes

The Government needs to make sure there are enough staff, training, specialist help, suitable spaces, services and money to make the changes work.

Recommendations

We have three main things we think the Government should do.

1. **Protect children's rights**

   Keep the legal rights that protect children and young people until the new system is fully in place and has been shown to work.

Before changing these rights, the Government should:

- find out how the changes could affect children and young people
- ask children, young people, families and other people what they think
- give Parliament the information it needs to decide if the changes should happen

2. Make the changes work for autistic children and young people

The Government should use what autistic young people have told us when making the changes. It should:

- use the six tests and checklists made from what young people told us
- make clear rules to help schools and colleges include autistic pupils
- make specialist support flexible, so children and young people can get different types of support based on their needs
- create a national group of autistic people who help train school and college staff

3. Keep listening and checking

The Government should keep listening to autistic children and young people as the changes happen. It should:

- have a permanent group of young people who can advise the Government
- make a national plan for checking whether the changes are making children's and young people's lives better
- make a long-term plan for the staff, money and training needed to make the changes work

The Government must listen to autistic children and young people, use what they tell us and make sure the changes make life better.

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