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Summary

This report brings together the views of autistic children and young people who worked with Ambitious about Autism over several months to explore the Government's proposed SEND reforms. Through seven workshops, they looked at the reforms as a whole and six key proposals in detail. Their views are supported by Ambitious about Autism's 2024 and 2026 surveys, national YouGov polling, research, official statistics and our experience of delivering education and support.

What autistic young people taught us

Three lessons came through clearly.

Good support starts with understanding each autistic child or young person as an individual. There is no single autistic experience. National frameworks can make support more consistent, but they must be flexible enough to respond to each person's strengths, needs, preferences, sensory profile, wellbeing and aspirations.

Plans and expectations only matter if they happen in practice. Young people repeatedly asked who would provide support, whether staff would have the right knowledge, whether schools and colleges would have enough funding and capacity, and what would happen when support was not delivered. SEND reform needs a clear plan for delivery, backed by clear duties and ways to put things right.

Inclusion should require the education system to change, not autistic children and young people to fit into it. Young people want schools and colleges to remove barriers. Inclusion should help autistic children and young people participate and belong as themselves, without having to mask or continually adapt to a system that was not designed around them.

Our position on the reforms

Autistic children and young people should not simply experience SEND reform. They should help create it and judge whether it is working. Autistic children and young people account for around one third of Education, Health and Care Plans and experience disproportionately high absence, suspension and exclusion. If reform does not work for them, it cannot be considered successful.

We welcome the Government's ambition to provide support earlier and make mainstream education more inclusive. But major changes should not be rushed while important parts of the new system remain untested. Existing legal rights provide a vital safety net. They should not be reduced until the new system has been fully implemented and independently shown to work.

Greater mainstream inclusion must not come at the expense of personalised or specialist support. National approaches should make support more consistent without forcing children and young people into rigid categories or standard packages. Mainstream and specialist capacity must grow together. Mainstream education will also need significant changes in staffing, expertise, environments, teaching and culture if more autistic children and young people are to thrive there.

A youth-led framework for SEND reform

Young people developed six tests that every part of SEND reform should meet:

1. Understand us as individuals
2. Adapt the system around us
3. Give us the support we need
4. Work with us, not just for us
5. Give schools and colleges what they need to support us
6. Make support reliable and accountable.

The report uses these tests to create practical checklists for National Inclusion Standards, Needs Assessments, Individual Support Plans, Specialist Provision Packages, the National Training Programme and Inclusion Bases.

Five principles for SEND reform

We brought together what young people told us with our wider evidence, policy expertise and experience of delivering education and support. From this, we identified five principles that should guide SEND reform:

- **Include autistic young people in decision-making.** Treat lived experience as expertise and give children and young people a real say in decisions.
- **Measure success through autistic young people's experiences.** Make their experiences visible and judge reform by whether their lives improve.
- **Set clear expectations for inclusion.** Make sure the wider education system removes barriers and supports different ways of being.
- **Build a system autistic young people can trust.** Make support timely, reliable and accountable, with independent ways to put things right.
- **Invest in the change the Government wants to see.** Build the staff, expertise, provision, environments and capacity needed to turn policy into practice.

Recommendations

SEND reform must turn ambition into a system where every autistic child and young person is understood, included and given the support they need to thrive. Our recommendations fall into three areas:

Safeguarding autistic children and young people's rights

Recommendation 1: Do not change existing protections until the new system is proven to work
Any legislation that changes statutory protections should not come into force until:

- full system implementation
- independent review against clear national measures of success
- public consultation
- Parliament consideration
- Full Impact Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment.

Make SEND reform work for autistic children and young people

Recommendation 2: Use the Youth-Led Framework to shape the reforms
Including:

- As recommended by Ellie, create a national network of autistic co-trainers to co-produce and co-deliver the National Training Programme
- As recommended by Rosanna, develop the final Specialist Provision Package as a flexible 'library' or 'pick 'n' mix' of specialist support
- As recommended by all, put the essential guarantees and safeguards within the new system on a statutory footing.

Recommendation 3: Establish the National Inclusion Standards as the overarching framework for inclusive education

Make good SEND policy-making systematic

Recommendation 4: Establish a National young People's Advisory Panel for SEND Reform
Recommendation 5: Establish a National SEND Reform Outcomes and Evaluation Framework
Recommendation 6: Publish a long-term SEND implementation investment and workforce plan

"Turn 'can't do' schools into 'can do' schools." *Rosanna*