



Autism in education report

May 2025

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Executive summary

This paper outlines proposed priorities for the Government to consider as it plans reforms to the education system for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

These priorities and suggestions were captured when a roundtable of autistic adults and young people, parents and carers, education professionals, sector leaders and researchers gathered to answer key questions that can inform policy-making on autism in education.

Participants attending the roundtable, and those who took part in subsequent interviews, raised the following key themes:

There's a clear need to boost education standards while also supporting young people with SEND, so it's time for a complete overhaul of the SEND system

For too long, boosting education standards while also supporting young people with SEND have been working against each other. We need holistic reform of mainstream education, grounded in an understanding of neurodiversity. To improve autism and SEND provision, we must understand more about what enables learning. To optimise learning for different pupils, we need educational environments and a flexible national curriculum, supported by a growing array of interventions, to promote and unlock learning. With effective SEND reform, there are only upsides for the education system as a whole.

Leadership from central Government could support culture change

Raising mainstream education standards, while also improving SEND provision, is a culture change that will remove obstacles that make it difficult for autistic children and their families to navigate the current system. At the same time, it can help resolve contradictory priorities that education leaders must so often address. Leadership from the Government could kickstart this culture change, setting out the clear expectation that autistic children are not an 'add on' in education. They belong there – and it is every teacher's job to teach them and have high aspirations for them.



To improve autism and SEND provision, we must understand more about what enables learning.

Including autistic children in education requires more inclusive learning environments and education policies, a flexible national curriculum and an autism-competent workforce

Children, families, schools and colleges currently grapple with a system that has not been designed to include autistic young people. Our education workforce largely lacks the autism competence, capacity and confidence needed to deliver successful autism inclusion. We have too few speech and language therapists or occupational therapists to support inclusion. Our curriculum lacks the flexibility and focus on skills needed for life, delivered meaningfully to all neurodivergent learners. Current learning environments often create sensory overwhelm for autistic children. Inflexibility around school uniform requirements, and behavior and exclusion policies, punish children for their autistic traits. These building blocks of the education system must be reformed if autistic children are to thrive in learning environments. This will require action from the Department for Education schools, academy chains and local authorities.



Current learning environments often create sensory overwhelm for autistic children.

Improving inclusion requires a step-change in accountability

Mainstream accountability mechanisms should mean that autistic children are included in education, with schools and local authorities held to account if they are not. This currently does not happen, with families of autistic children over-represented in tribunal statistics. Until school and local authority leaders are properly held to account, inclusion will remain elusive.

Move from a system that waits for children to 'fail' to getting early support easily

Young people and educators talked about early support being locked behind a system of processes, rather than available as and when children might need it to succeed in education.

We must use data to plan a range of provisions to meet a range of needs

We heard about positive examples of many types of provision – in mainstream education, resource units and special schools. But, too often, there is a lack of special school places or they are poorly planned.

Key recommendations for Government

1. Lead culture change

Provide national leadership for a culture shift that views excellence in education and inclusion for autistic children (and all children with SEND) as fundamentally the same mission.

2. Deliver the building blocks of inclusion through the current education reviews

Use the curriculum and teacher training reviews to deliver the building blocks of an education system that successfully includes autistic children. This should include:

- an inclusive teacher training and education workforce strategy
- an inclusive curriculum and assessment system
- inclusive education policies
- inclusive education environments and building design.

3. Create a range of provision that meets a range of needs

Build on successful examples – in mainstream education, resource units and special schools – and use better data to plan provision for the children and young people already in our education system those who will be entering it, from early years into adulthood.

4. Ensure a system of resources that means children get support before they hit a crisis

Deliver a funding system that incentivises the timely provision of inclusive early support, rather than waiting for children to ‘fail’.

5. Gear accountability mechanisms towards inclusion

Reform accountability mechanisms – including Ofsted – to reflect expectations of inclusion.

Principles to guide reform

Finally, participants in the roundtable offer some guiding principles for education and SEND reform:

- Young people’s and families’ voices should be heard in developing policy and practice.
- Reforms should be evidence based.
- Take a whole-child, family and community approach, recognising that children are more than just their autism diagnosis and exist in a wider context that impacts their education.
- Take a lifetime approach to policy-making that recognises failure to support autistic young people’s inclusion in education to achieve their full potential has long-term costs. These costs include mental health impacts, poor employment outcomes and welfare payments as a result of negative experiences of education.

Introduction

Ambitious about Autism brought together autistic adults and young people, parents and carers, education professionals, sector leaders and researchers to answer key questions to inform policy-making on autism in education.

The aim was to propose priorities for the government to consider as it plans reforms to education and special educational needs (SEND).

This report includes recommendations for reform aimed at improving the experience and outcomes for autistic young people in education, whilst using resources more effectively. It includes short-term and longer-term ideas for reform, to unlock the potential of autistic children and young people, who have lots to offer our society.

Improving education for autistic children and young people is not a niche issue. Autistic pupils are currently highly represented among those who are persistently absent or excluded from school, experiencing mental health challenges, not in education, employment or training, and unemployed as adults. Progress on these issues requires progress for autistic learners, particularly as the number of children identified as autistic continues to grow.

These poor outcomes are not inevitable. They are a function of how our education system is currently designed. It can be changed. It **must** be changed if the Government is to achieve its mission of opportunity for all, giving children the best start in life and growing the economy – as well as meeting its aim to improve inclusion in mainstream schools.



Improving education for autistic children and young people is not a niche issue.

What are the experiences of autistic young people in education?¹

Experiences varied

“ It does come down to luck sometimes. Whether a teacher has training. Whether a teacher has empathy.”
- Young person

Experiences were described as a ‘lottery’, determined by where autistic pupils live, who can advocate for them, and which school they go to. Autistic young people with similar needs had very different experiences, depending on the individuals around them or the setting they attended. This was seen as unfair and a failure of the system.

Teachers’ training and understanding varied greatly, meaning support depended largely on individual staff members. Peer experiences also differed: some autistic students felt they received more support due to being in different classes or because of their personalities.

Where experiences were positive, it often depended on the luck of having an understanding staff member for a period of time, or accessing a special school where staff knew about autism and were skilled in teaching autistic children. For some young people, attending a special school was their first experience of having friends or attending parties.

Experiences were mostly negative, discriminatory and harmful

“ The first person who called me retarded was a year two teacher.”
- Young person

While experiences varied, they were commonly characterised by isolation, misunderstanding and punishment for autistic traits. Some pupils were forced to leave school due their needs not being accommodated, leaving children with no access to education. Some experienced poor understanding and hostile behaviour from teachers.

One student experienced severe stigma, including someone posting online, warning other students about him without his knowledge. Another was excluded from one school and felt she faced racial bias in how she was treated. Yet another pupil was discouraged from pursuing sixth form and university ambitions based on assumptions about her capabilities.

Many students were bullied for their differences, by both peers and teachers. Some students were forced to leave schools due to unmanageable environments. Many of the negative experiences had lasting effects.

¹ Participants at the roundtable discussed the fact that the term ‘autistic’ covers children and young people with a range of different strengths and needs, and how the way those children will be supported across mainstream and specialist settings will vary greatly. Young people, adults and parents participating in the session had experiences of both mainstream and specialist settings – some had experienced both. We recognise that we will not be able to capture the full range of experiences in this roundtable report.

“ Young people feeling distressed the entire day, exhausted all day, fearful, forced, confused. School day is draining. The consequences of this are poor mental health, absence – the trends we are seeing.”

- Parent

These accounts are supported by research that shows autistic young people have overwhelmingly negative experiences of school, largely due to unmet sensory needs, an inflexible system and a lack of teacher understanding, which impacts negatively on mental health². During lockdown, being out of school was shown to have a positive impact on mental health for some autistic learners³.

Another concern raised is the lack of special school places for autistic children with learning disabilities, complex health needs and/or mental health conditions. Some young people were at home for long periods, or offered inappropriate places such as in Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) schools, because there was simply nowhere else for them to go. There were fears that if specialist places are cut before we improve mainstream education, even more children will be left at home.

Lack of understanding and acceptance among educators

“ Negative labels take a while to shake off. Takes a while to realise that teachers are people and make mistakes, but when you are a kid they are such an authoritative figure that you are made to feel that you are wrong and they are right.”

- Young person

Teachers often had a poor or incorrect understanding of autism. Teachers' biases and lack of autism training led to negative labelling and unfair treatment. Some teachers influenced pupils' attitudes, leading to bullying and discrimination. Teachers often had conversations about students in front of them, displaying a lack of respect.

“ I got punished [for] a lot for things I didn't understand. I used to get in trouble for not making eye contact. That was part of my suspension.”

- Young person

Autistic young people describe schools frequently applying harsh punishments for autistic traits, such as avoiding eye contact or hand flapping, rather than offering support. Suspension and expulsion were used inappropriately, with students often punished for behaviours they did not understand. Staff sometimes refused reasonable adjustments around dietary needs or sensory aids, despite students' obvious struggles. The presence of a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) helped in some cases, but support was inconsistent and sometimes framed as a privilege rather than a necessity.

² Gray, L. Exploring the experiences of school exclusion for pupils on the autism spectrum. Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology. UCL Institute of Education (accessed 8 May 2025).

³ Heyworth, M., Brett, S., and Pellicano, E. (2021). “It just fits my needs better”: Autistic students and parents' experiences of learning from home during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sage Journals (accessed 8 May 2025).

Lack of flexibility and support

“ **No one’s bothered about inclusion because no one’s measuring it.**”

- Professional

Young people, parents and teachers feel the education system isn’t structured to enable staff to adapt to children’s strengths and needs. Inflexible uniform or behaviour policies create significant barriers to inclusion and deplete the ‘toolbox’ teachers can use to support autistic learners.

Failure to provide reasonable adjustments and dismissing students’ difficulties appear to be common. Necessary support is often absent or inconsistent, leading to anxiety and depression in learners, compounded by a lack of access to mental health support.

Sensory and environmental challenges

“ **I used to go home crying every single day. I was so isolated. I had a lot of sensory issues, with the shouting, [and] there were also building works, bright lights, strong smells. There was no acceptance that those things were problems. They said I was able to handle it. I couldn’t and had meltdowns.**”

- Young person

Young people all raise sensory difficulties, such as noisy classrooms, lighting and sensations caused by uniforms, but these are often dismissed by staff. The physical environment of schools can be challenging for autistic learners – for example, open-plan spaces and busy corridors – and schools do not always accommodate sensory needs, leading to sensory overload.

Staff appear to have a poor understanding of sensory needs and ways to prevent escalation of distress. In some cases, supports like fidget toys were restricted.

Poor understanding of intersectionality

“ **Once I became a wheelchair user I felt like I was made to choose ‘what was wrong with me’ to get support. I couldn’t get support for all my needs.**”

- Young person

Some students faced challenges beyond being autistic, such as physical disabilities, learning difficulties and socioeconomic struggles. Schools often forced students to choose between different support needs, rather than addressing them holistically.

Poor transitions

“ **Just as a child manages to get used to the setup, something big changes.**”

- Professional

Challenges seem to peak around times of transitions, with difficult moves including the move from Key Stage 1 to 2, primary to secondary, and from secondary into post-school education. Too often, transition planning isn’t good enough, with young people not prepared for the next stages in life. There is a lack of coordination of – and access to – information and specialist support services. For some children, they fall off a cliff edge when leaving secondary school.

A battle – for children, families, educators and local authorities

“ Took a long time to get an EHC plan. Communication with the school wasn’t great, lots of meetings, long process. Difference it made was the legal standing, particularly on exams. Wish I had got it sooner.”
- Autistic adult

As many SEND reviews have found, we heard that families must still fight for basic access to education, constantly facing battles and/or stigma. Parents described teachers showing a lack of willingness to engage in dialogue about possible solutions. Teachers sometimes expressed anxiety about being asked to do something they felt was beyond their capacity. Adversarial positions can become entrenched from an early stage.

Access to an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan was inconsistent, and delays in getting a plan caused difficulties. EHC plans were seen as crucial for accessing necessary support and holding schools accountable. The process of obtaining an EHC plan can be long and frustrating, with some students being denied support until much later in their education.

“ On EHC plans, I can’t believe how much money they spend trying to fight them, instead of just accepting [needs].”
- Young person

Inaccessible curriculum and assessment system failings

“ Exam arrangements are so important. I had a separate room and wanted to know the arrangements. I asked, they said they never got arrangements wrong, but then they got it wrong.”
- Autistic adult

Many saw the national curriculum as inflexible, difficult to teach inclusively and lacking in some of the essential life skills that can be transformational for autistic learners. Some also raised the importance of autistic learners being able to see themselves in the curriculum.

Assessment structures were seen as letting autistic young people down, with educators often struggling to find meaningful ways to recognise the achievements of autistic learners. Exam accommodations were often poorly executed, with some schools lacking separate rooms for students needing quiet spaces, making exams stressful. Clear communication about exam arrangements was critical but often missing.

Lack of essential health and care input

“ EHC plans were very focused on education part of it, but maybe more focus needs to be put on the health aspect of it. More should be in place for the health and care. It’s always grades, grades, grades, but not looking at the whole person.”
- Professional

Too often, health aspects of EHC plans were not funded, which created barriers to accessing education. In some areas, there are two-year waiting lists for speech and language therapy or mental health support. A lack of access to specialist therapeutic staff – educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists – is creating delays in assessment and support, which means children are not able to access education.

In some examples, young people were not accessing mental health support for treatable conditions, because the mental health need was falsely seen to be ‘part of their autism’.

A funding system geared towards waiting for children to fail

“**Resources are locked behind a wall of diagnosis; you shouldn’t need a key to get in.**”
- Professional

There were several examples of perverse incentives caused by funding system design. One education leader was told that the only option to trigger the right level of provision for a pupil in their area was to exclude them. This cannot be a lawful or appropriate way to access support, but is an example of how the current system pushes children to ‘fail’ before support is provided.

“**If children don’t need an EHC plan, but they do need something specific, the only way to do it is to go through the process to get a plan.**”
- Professional

Another example is an autistic child in a mainstream primary school, whose parent repeatedly asked for low level support – some time with a teaching assistant to help focus and regulation – and was told that her child did not have any support needs. Following a meltdown when the child became dysregulated, the school and local authority then said the child’s needs were too severe to be met in mainstream. He is now at home awaiting a special school place.

Data show that children in the most specialist schools have often experienced several failed placements in mainstream and generic special schools before being able to access specialist support⁴. This was seen as a false economy and system failure, forcing children through multiple negative experiences of education before their escalating needs were met as a last resort.

Budgets and spending decisions tend to be compartmentalised, rather than recognising the lifetime value – in welfare, employment, criminal justice, social care, mental health settings – of providing the right support early to help children stay in school, learn and thrive.

Waiting for children to hit a crisis in order to trigger support is proving harmful to young people and families, and is costly for public finances.

In the next section, we set out examples of ‘what works’ for autistic children in education. In the final section, we recommend concrete action to deliver an education in which autistic learners can thrive and achieve.

⁴ NASS survey of 300 parents of children in residential special schools in 2017. For over 70% of children, their current school was the third they’d attended. For 11% they had previously attended 5 or more schools.

What works for autistic young people in education?

A whole school or college culture of acceptance and inclusion

“**Speak with the child and accept their response. Learn what’s wrong.**”
- Professional

A welcoming and accepting culture makes a significant difference in self-confidence and wellbeing for autistic pupils, both of which are pre-cursors to learning. Schools where differences are acknowledged and embraced create a sense of belonging. Kind and patient teachers had a positive impact, e.g. teachers greeting students daily. Having supportive peer relationships helped in navigating challenges.

“**My friends used to explain emotions out loud. I learned a lot of my manners [that way] in secondary school and took that to university.**”
- Young person

The features of inclusive cultures include:

- listening to children, young people and families, working in partnership and fostering good communication
- consciously supporting a sense of belonging for all individuals, and valuing and respecting differences
- a person-centred and flexible approach, based on having high aspirations for each learner, delivered across the educational setting
- building a curious mindset in staff, e.g. about why behaviour might be occurring, and staying alert to early indicators of the need for support
- thinking creatively about activities to build connection, such as using interests, strengths or clubs, rather than putting people together simply because they are autistic
- a flexible approach to curriculum and delivery, recognising that essential learning might include basic life skills, emotional regulation or agency.

“**It only takes one adult, sometimes within an otherwise good team, to spoil the experience.**”
- Professional

Teacher training and an education workforce that understands autism

“ I had one good form teacher who understood me and used other forms of communication, let me show my screen, use flip boards.”
- Young person

For young people, parents and educators, the single biggest factor in having positive experiences of education was teachers and staff understanding autism. Teacher training is seen as a key intervention, and the lack of it is seen as the main reason inclusion fails for many autistic children. Those in leadership positions in schools with experience of autism, and autistic teachers being included in staff teams, were particularly helpful to inclusion. National standards and expectations around autism training were recommended.

Also critical to inclusion and significant differences to learner outcomes were:

- good use of support staff, with evidence from the Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants project showing the benefits to support staff of training and continuing professional development
- training for leadership on how to make the most of their role⁵.

A national strategy for deploying support staff was recommended, recognising their key role in education settings.

Elements of successful teacher training were seen to include:

- training created, reviewed and delivered by people with lived experience alongside professionals to ensure accuracy
- whole-school training, including for leaders and support staff
- ongoing training throughout careers, regularly refreshed
- evaluating training to ensure skills and competencies gained are being applied to improve experiences and outcomes
- consideration of mental health issues presenting differently in autistic young people
- awareness of intersectionality for autistic young people, for example socioeconomic background, ethnic diversity and culture
- hands-on experience in special schools or resourced provision.

Settings that supported autistic learners well also had a strategy for engaging wider expertise and therapies, such as mental health professionals, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and educational psychologists.

⁵ Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: maximisingtas.co.uk

Flexibility and well-executed reasonable adjustments

“ Sixth form [was better] – no longer had to wear uniform, could have fidget spinners. You could control your sensory experience. Smaller class sizes in sixth form, and ability to pick subjects you’re interested in for A levels also helped.”
- Young person

Young people and educators shared several practical solutions that enabled inclusion without any cost or resource. These were all underpinned by a willingness to be flexible, and in some cases made a major difference to learning and outcomes.

Examples included:

- flexibility on school uniform policy, e.g. wearing tracksuits on PE days to limit difficulties in changing, or allowing softer clothes in uniform colours
- allowing a student to sit on the floor where it’s easier concentration
- flexibility on arrival time, so students could enter the building before or after the ‘rush’ that caused sensory overwhelm or dysregulation
- use of a child’s own sensory items in school, such as ear defenders or fidget spinners
- alternative communication methods, such as allowing a child to use flipcharts to write or to write on the interactive whiteboard.

“ Our research showed the two factors that most supported autistic young people to be successfully included in education were positive, trusting relationships with teachers and flexibility”.⁶
- Young person

Sustaining adjustments that work, rather than limiting them, and being open to changing adjustments, were features of successful approaches. Schools that allowed pupils to manage their own sensory experiences – e.g. testing sensory tools, adapting the uniform so they could learn free of physical distress – provided better learning environments.

Educators shared that settings can be clear on behaviour expectations and have robust policies that are also flexible enough to accommodate additional needs. Making reasonable adjustments is not incompatible with raising behaviour standards, as adjustments often support children to positively regulate their own behaviour.

⁶ McNerney, C., Hill, V., & Pellicano, E. (2015). Choosing a secondary school placement for students with an autism spectrum condition: A multi-informant study. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 19, 1096-1116 (accessed 8 May 2025).

Flexibility around curriculum and a strengths-based approach

“ **How would the curriculum look different if it was designed to include autistic learners?**”

- Professional

Some schools have developed specialist curriculum pathways, in some cases working alongside special school partners, to deliver learning that best supported progress and achievement for autistic learners. These included pre-formal, semi-formal and formal pathways, linking to the engagement model. Children were able to move between pathways as best suited their development.⁷ A flexible curriculum enabled teachers to work outside of age-related expectations, and focus on core skills that supported preparation for adulthood.

“ **A theatre class used my strengths of organisation, which I appreciated.**”

- Autistic adult

Schools that focused on students' strengths and encouraged personal interests had a lasting positive effect. Having control over subject choices and schedules helped some young people to experience greater autonomy and with transitioning to adulthood. Among the young people we spoke to, schools that recognised the role of pupils pursuing their interests as part of their flourishing delivered better outcomes.

“ **Person-centred approach at SEND school was helpful, and they would talk about my interests. They knew me for me and not my academic scores. Incentivised my interests.**”

- Young person

A range of provisions for a range of needs

We heard examples of 'what works' from several different types of setting, supporting the view that a range of provisions are needed for autistic children and young people with different needs.

Examples included:

- Special schools often provided more flexibility and a person-centred approach. Small class sizes and autism-friendly sensory environments were factors for success.
- Mainstream schools with small class sizes and flexible learning options were seen as more accommodating than those without.
- Autism units and resource provision had positive results where a whole-school approach was embedded, staff were skilled and children were able to invite peers in to share the space.
- Spaces where autistic learners could go to be with understanding staff, and access mental health support such as a therapist, were also successful examples.

Educators reflected that primary schools were often better set up for inclusion than secondary schools, due to their size, supported transitions into and around school, and having one or two key teachers and classrooms. This is in contrast with the size, movement and volume of different staff in secondary schools, which perhaps helps explain why 82% of autistic pupils attend school at Key Stage 1, compared with just 36% at Key Stage 4.⁸

⁷ For example, the Cherry Garden model: www.cherrygardenschool.co.uk/branch-maps

⁸ *Ambitious about Autism*. (March 2025). *When will we learn: Lost learning report* (accessed 8 May 2025).

Positive approaches to transition

“**Creative approaches to exploring career aspirations, rather than writing us off for being ‘unrealistic’.**”

- Young person

Young people reflected that they sometimes fared better in further and higher education than at school, partly due to the flexibility and choice over their programme of study. Sixth form and college provided more freedom, which supported the transition to adulthood. A focus on independence and interest-based learning helped students feel more hopeful about the future.

“**My quality of life [has] significantly improved since I left school.**”

- Young person

Starting conversations about transition early, and genuinely empowering autistic young people, rather than protecting or cushioning them, were seen as critical factors in positive transitions. Young people felt most positive when they could see that they had power to influence their own path, e.g. hearing from staff: “You have control about how this ends up.”

A multidisciplinary approach to education inclusion – health and care

Multidisciplinary input, from across health, social care, families and educators, was described as something that “restocked the inclusion toolbox” for teachers.

Analysis of support in the most specialist schools found that the biggest difference to positive outcomes, beyond good teaching and learning, was made by providing therapies that wrapped around education: mental health support, speech and language therapy and occupational therapy.⁹

Early intervention, diagnosis, and access to support

“**There are ‘bad costs’ and ‘good costs’ in autism. There is loads of evidence that early intervention is effective for children – and for budgets.**”¹⁰

- Professional

Identifying needs early on and providing timely support was associated with better outcomes for children and families, and better relationships with schools and teachers. Professionals referred to the benefits of the multidisciplinary check for two-year olds, where it is delivered, and the family hub system, which was recommended for nationwide roll-out as quickly as possible. Other specific local early intervention models were praised, and information about them could be shared to promote wider delivery.¹¹

⁹ National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS). (2023). *Reaching my potential: The value of SEND provision through learners’ stories* (accessed 8 May 2025).

¹⁰ Knapp, M., Chylarova, E., Nazak, S. et al. Care Policy and Evaluation Centre (CPEC), London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). (December 2024). *The Economic Case for Prioritising Autism in Policy and Reform* (accessed 8 May 2025).

¹¹ For example, *The Manchester model*, working with families with emerging neurodivergent profiles, pre-diagnosis where diagnosis waits are long, and REACH ASD, again, pre-diagnosis support.



Once I got the diagnosis, they gave me a lot of support. Speech and language therapy. Teachers became a bit nice and more understanding.”

- Young person

Diagnosis and EHC plans were seen as crucial for ‘being believed’, being treated with more understanding, unlocking necessary support and holding schools accountable. In the current absence of widespread early intervention approaches, for many children getting a diagnosis and an EHC plan is the only thing that works in terms of enabling them to access education.

Investment in early support for young children and their families was raised as cost effective, as well as delivering long-term benefits for children.

Some educators felt that part of early intervention is recognising that, sometimes, an earlier specialist placement is the most efficient use of resources.

They suggest building towards a model where children might be in a specialist setting while they need to learn specific skills like self-regulation, and then be supported to move back into less specialist settings or mainstream settings.

Recommendations resulting from the input we received on what works are set out in the final section below.

Recommendations

“ We need to reinvent in mainstream education for a world that now accepts neurodiversity.”

- Professional

1. Lead culture change

Provide national leadership for a culture shift that views excellence in education and inclusion for autistic children (and all children with SEND) as fundamentally the same mission:

- Consistently reinforce the message that inclusion for autistic children is an expectation in every nursery, school and college. It is not an add-on – it is part of the core work of education.
- Challenge the myth that excellence in education standards is somehow at odds with teaching autistic children. Excellence in education is delivering on high aspirations for all children, through an expanding toolkit of approaches for different learners.
- Recognise that previous governments have unintentionally built drivers into the education system that undercut inclusion efforts, such as zero tolerance behaviour policies and narrow focus on attainment for some, at the expense of achievement for all.
- Lead culture change so that exclusion is seen as a failure of schools, not of children.

2. Deliver the building blocks of inclusion through the current education reviews

Use the curriculum and teacher training reviews to deliver the building blocks of an education system in which autistic children can be successfully included:

- **An inclusive teacher training and education workforce strategy:**
 - Provide teacher training and continuing professional development on autism for all education staff, regularly refreshed and informed and/or delivered by autistic individuals.
 - Put in place a plan to fill the skills and capacity gaps in the current education (and wider) workforce, e.g. occupational therapists and speech and language therapists.
- **An inclusive curriculum and assessment system:**
 - Create a more flexible curriculum, so teaching can be adapted to the needs and interests of autistic pupils and others with SEND, as well as the wider cohort.
 - Enhance content on preparing for adulthood, promoting life skills and independence.
 - Evaluate whether assessment pathways enable autistic young people to gain recognition of their achievements, rather than drive them out of education.
 - Hold schools and assessment bodies to account properly for making reasonable adjustments to exam arrangements.

- **Inclusive education policies and environments:**
 - Promote guidance setting out the positive impact of having inclusive uniform, behaviour and wider policies, including examples of good practice and of unlawful and discriminatory policies to highlight ‘what not to do’.
 - Ensure future school building or renovation programmes create accessible environments for neurodivergent learners as well as those with other disabilities.

3. **Create a range of provisions that meets a range of needs, based on data**

Build on successful examples and use data better to plan provision for the children already in our system and those who enter it, from early years to post school education:

- **Map children and young people’s needs on longer-term horizons**, in order to effectively plan a range of current and future provision to meet the range of needs.
- **Create regional or national planning structures** for children with low-incidence, high-support needs, to ensure sufficient provision rather than crisis placements.
- **Build and share an evidence base from all sectors of what works** in autism education.
- **Pilot and evaluate innovative models of support**, championing new ways of achieving excellence for autistic young people.

4. **Ensure a system of resources that means children get support before they hit a crisis**

Deliver a funding system that incentivises the timely provision of inclusive support, rather than waiting for children to ‘fail’, such as:

- **Sufficient resource for schools to deliver reasonable adjustments** even if pupils do not have a formal diagnosis or an EHC plan, so we meet need when and where it exists, rather than locking resources behind a system of processes.
- **Invest in an autism-skilled children’s workforce**, so that more children have needs identified and met as a matter of course, rather than through a long process.
- **Promote joint commissioning and sharing of support** across settings in the same communities.
- **Ensure an end to perverse incentives**, by building in ways to deliver support or a move to another school that do not rely on exclusion or two-year waits for assessments or diagnoses.
- **Invest in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS) and incentivise local authorities to end spending on tribunals**, focussing resources on meeting support needs earlier so they do not escalate.
- **Promote collaborative models of local working** where schools, local authorities and health teams work together to align diagnosis and support.

5. Gear accountability mechanisms towards inclusion

“ Schools need to be accountable for inclusion if we want school leaders to prioritise it. We can’t blame head teachers for looking at other things before inclusion when we tell them to prioritise other things over it.”
- Professional

Reform accountability mechanisms to reflect expectations of inclusion:

- **Continue developing a greater focus on SEND** in Ofsted inspections, including consideration of excluded or absent children.
- **Improve autism training** for Ofsted inspectors.
- **Commission a review of schools’ accessibility plans and reasonable adjustments**, to make practical recommendations for improving inclusion of autistic pupils in schools now.

Principles to guide reform

Finally, we offer some guiding principles for education and SEND reform:

- Young people’s and families’ voices should be heard in developing policy and practice.
- Reforms should be evidence based.
- Take a whole-child, family and community approach, recognising children are more than just their autism diagnosis, and exist in a wider context that impacts their education.
- Take a lifetime approach to policy-making that recognises failure to support autistic young people’s inclusion in education to achieve their full potential has long-term costs. These costs include the mental health impacts, poor employment outcomes and welfare payments as a result of negative experiences of education.

Shaping this report

Participants in the original round table and interviews following it, came from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of expertise, united by a common goal of improving education for autistic young people. Educational professionals, academics, charities, parents and autistic people contributed including:

Claire Dorer
Chief Executive Officer, NASS

Philippa Stobbs OBE
SEND expert

Claire Thomson
Educational Consultant, Tarka Learning Partnership Trust

Stephen Kingdon
Disabled Children's Partnership

Daniel Stavrou
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Tracy Aust
Chief Executive Officer and Principal,
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Elizabeth Archer
Chief Executive Officer, PDA Society

Virginia Bovell
Author and parent

Ian Adam Bellamy
Independent Consultant, former Autism Education Trust board member

Members of Ambitious about Autism's youth council also attended the roundtable providing valuable insight and expertise that shaped this final report.

Jessie Hewitson
Journalist, author and parent

Ambitious about Autism who organised the roundtable and compiled this report, would like to thank all of the participants for their valued contributions.

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