



**Ambitious
about Autism**

Written OFF?

**Tackling problems in the SEND
system that hold back autistic
children and young people**

Foreword by Daniel, a young person from the Ambitious Youth Network

As an autistic student, I want the next generation of autistic young people to have a better experience of school than I did.

I'd arrive at school, often already in a distressed state due to the anxiety of facing a whole day in a hostile and overwhelming environment, where I knew if I got overwhelmed or started having a meltdown there would be no one to help me. I faced a complete lack of understanding of what was happening, even from SEN staff. I was told they did not have resources to help me. It was suggested I was choosing not to attend school, and that I needed more resilience.

The lack of sufficient support meant I would spend lessons stood in corridors. There were no quiet spaces to retreat to from the overwhelming sensory input, and I wasn't allowed adjustments such as wearing noise-cancelling headphones in the classroom, as it was said to be unfair to the other students. During times I was having a meltdown, I was told there were no teaching assistants available to work with me and supervise me, and I was made to feel like a problem. Even when I did manage to stay in lessons, I was in such an anxious state I wasn't learning anything. The lack of understanding of autism excluded me from learning, and I underachieved in my GCSEs. I felt the focus was on numbers, like attendance in the building, rather than my wellbeing or what I was learning.

This approach ignores the impact of inadequate SEN support, and forces whole families into crisis. The threat of legal action means parents feel they have little choice but to force their child into a school that doesn't help them, or face prosecution. That damages family relationships and leaves students feeling completely alone.

One size does not fit all, particularly for autistic students, and we shouldn't face a worse future due to the attitudes of the system. I hope the government will listen to what's in this report and change things for the better for autistic students.

Foreword by Tom Hunt, MP for Ipswich

Getting SEND provision right from the early years is vital to help children with special needs. Having spent time on the Education Committee and advocated for this topic both in Westminster and my constituency in Ipswich, I know how much it means to families that autistic children get the right support at the right time.

I was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia at the age of 12, having a reading and writing age of an eight-year-old, so I know just how significant a timely diagnosis and the appropriate support can be. This report sets out what autistic young people and their families think could help them get the support they need.

One of the most significant adjustments could be to the system of incentives: we need to make sure the way Ofsted assesses schools puts an emphasis on being rewarded for the best possible SEND support. No teacher should ever feel conflicted between doing what is best for SEND pupils and professional success.

We know the huge potential of getting SEND provision right – but also the costs to society and to individuals of getting it wrong. The recommendations in this report to improve the SEND workforce, provide the right incentives, and get schools and SEND policy pushing in the same direction, could have a big impact.

Ambitious about Autism

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity standing with autistic children and young people. We believe every autistic child and young person has the right to be themselves and realise their ambitions. We started as one school and have become a movement for change. We champion rights, campaign for change and create opportunities.

We are experts in autism education and we run several education services across London providing specialist learning and support to hundreds of children and young people who have a primary diagnosis of autism and, in some cases, also have learning disabilities, additional learning difficulties or social, emotional, physical and mental health needs.

We began with **TreeHouse School**, a non-maintained special school, established in 1997. We also run the Ambitious about Autism Schools Trust with **The Rise School**, a free school educating pupils aged 4-18, who access the national curriculum at approximately the same level as their peers and will soon be opening **Spring School** in Kingston. Ambitious about Autism also runs **Ambitious College**, co-located with two mainstream college campuses in London. All of our settings follow the **Ambitious Approach**, our model of education practice.

We are co-founders of the **Autism Education Trust** (AET) and our Chief Executive is Chair of the AET and the Autism Alliance.

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About autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which is estimated to affect one in 100 people in the UK¹. However, it is likely this figure is higher. A recent study of seven million young people found that around one in 57 children in England are autistic². Autism affects the way a person communicates and how they experience the world around them.

It is described as a spectrum condition because while autistic people share certain characteristics, they will be highly individual in their interests, needs and preferences.

Some autistic people live independently, but others may need additional support because of a learning disability or other health needs such as mental health or epilepsy. Autistic children and young people face enormous challenges due to a lack of understanding of their needs. Early intervention and support are critical if autistic children and young people are to be themselves and realise their ambitions.



¹ The NHS Information Centre for health and social care. **Autism Spectrum Disorders in adults living in households throughout England. Report from the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey.** Published 2007.

² Roman-Urrestarazu A, van Kessel R, Allison C, Matthews FE, Brayne C, Baron-Cohen S. **Association of Race/Ethnicity and Social Disadvantage with Autism Prevalence in 7 Million School Children in England. JAMA Pediatrics.** Published 2021.

Contents

Executive summary	7	5. Do we have the workforce we need for autistic children and young people to achieve?	51
Introduction	9	5.1 Education workforce	51
Methodology	11	5.2 Health and care workforce	56
1. In tough times: Protecting rights or writing off autistic young people?	13	5.3 The wider workforce	58
1.1 Why families are worried about changes to the SEND system	14	5.4 Working together	58
1.2 Financial sustainability: Challenges in SEND funding and emerging solutions	19	6. Is SEND accountability a write off?	60
1.3 How shifts in the SEND review could help children now.	26	6.1 Who is accountable?	60
2. Are autistic children written off at school?	28	6.2 National standards: Accountability vs standardisation	61
2.1 Attainment and achievement	29	6.3 Mediation and the SEND Tribunal	64
2.2 Behaviour and exclusions.	32	6.4 Ofsted	67
2.3 Attendance	34	7. Right support, right place, right time: Mainstream, special and the power of partnerships	69
2.4 Culture.	36	7.1 Why is demand for special school places rising?	70
3. How can we tackle the mental health crisis and improve the wellbeing of autistic young people?	37	7.2 Sharing the expertise between mainstream and special schools and colleges.	73
3.1 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)	37	8. What is most important to autistic young people and their families?	75
3.2 Education and mental health	40	8.1 Being heard and understood	75
4. How can we boost employability and support the move into adulthood?	42	8.2 Having their basic rights protected	76
4.1 Autism and the transition to employment	42	8.3 Being able to be themselves	77
4.2 Careers advice	46	Conclusion and recommendations	78
4.3 Supported internships, apprenticeships and employment programmes	48		

Executive summary

Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families face a broken system that often adds to their struggles instead of helping them. These are the findings of the government's own SEND review.

The 1,867 autistic young people, parents and carers we heard from during Summer 2022, through surveys and focus groups, agree the system is broken. We stand with autistic young people in calling for urgent change to fix it.

But the government's current proposals risk making things worse, writing off autistic young people before they've even left school. We call on the government to listen to autistic young people and their families and change their proposals, so all children can achieve their potential – at school and beyond. So, what needs to change?

Firstly, to meet the key aim of building parental confidence in the SEND system, **government must commit to protecting the laws and the funding families depend on** to get support for their children. Upholding the Children and Families Act provisions that help children with SEND get the assessments, support and school places they need is vital, particularly when money is so tight for government and families alike. The government could announce this now to reassure families they won't pull the rug from under them.

Next, **boosting achievement for young people with SEND must become a golden thread that runs through all education policy** as well as wider policy relating to health and employment, where needed. At the moment, autistic children and young people are being unintentionally written off because government policy on schools actively works against government policy on SEND. For example, through narrow achievement targets, misdirected attendance policy and approaches to behaviour and exclusions that disproportionately punish autistic pupils. We set out below exactly how this shift can begin.

Thirdly, we must recognise what makes the single biggest difference to autistic young people and their families in their day-to-day lives - the skilled and dedicated staff in schools, health and other services, who go above and beyond to make things work for children and families. And conversely, the

devastating impact that insufficient or unskilled staff can have. There are too many professions, like social work and speech and language therapy, where we simply do not have enough people to fill essential jobs. **We must build the skilled, valued and sufficient SEND workforce we need.**

Better accountability is the fourth key aspect of a SEND system that works. As the only universal accountability mechanism for education, **Ofsted must give higher priority to the quality of SEND support in education inspections.** Only when every school and college is properly held to account for how well it supports children with SEND, will we have an education system that enables all children and young people to reach their potential.

Finally, we need to stop entrenching the divide between mainstream education and special schools and colleges – a divide that makes it harder for autistic children to get support. We need **a stronger vision for sharing expertise across mainstream, alternative provision and specialist settings** in a local community, so that the right support can be connected to the child that needs it, rather than a family having to fight tooth and nail to find their way.

If the SEND review can change these five things, it will transform the lives of the 182,493 autistic children and young people in England and their families. It all starts with **listening to young people with SEND and their parents and carers** and acting on what they tell us.

We stand with autistic young people and their families in calling on government to:

- Uphold current laws that help children with SEND get the assessments, support and school place they need and protect their funding, to avoid making things worse and causing active harm to children and families.
- Make all education policy work for SEND pupils so they can achieve their potential, with a clear expectation that every school is a SEND school, every teacher is a SEND teacher and every policy is a SEND policy.
- Publish a plan to develop a valued, skilled, sufficient SEND workforce, backed by resources and with clear timescales.
- Ask Ofsted to make the quality of SEND support a greater priority in inspections.
- Gather and share evidence on how mainstream education and special schools and colleges can work together to get children the right support, at the right time, in the right place.

Introduction

When we asked autistic young people what they want from life, their aspirations were simple.

They said they want:

- To be able to go to school
 - To learn while they are there
 - To not get ‘kicked out’
 - To get the help they need to be healthy, mentally and physically
 - To get a job when they grow up
-

It doesn’t sound like much to ask, does it? But for most autistic young people, these things are still desperately out of reach.

Autistic young people are twice as likely to be excluded from school than their peers³. Less than half say they are happy in school⁴ and only 20% achieve grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs, compared to 52% of all pupils⁵. Autistic children and young people feel like they have been written off.

There is widespread agreement that the SEND system, which should support autistic young people, isn’t working. The government proposed changes to the system in their SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) green paper in April 2022 and carried out a consultation.

We support the aims of the green paper, for children and young people to have “the opportunity to thrive, with access to the right support, in the right place, and at the right time, so they can fulfil their potential and lead happy, healthy and productive adult lives⁶.”

But, as they stand, the proposals the government announced to deliver that aim are not good news for autistic children and young people. Instead of helping, they unintentionally write off another generation of autistic children and young people.

Autism is the most prevalent primary need among children with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans⁷. A significant proportion of children receiving SEN Support will be autistic. Many autistic young people have physical or mental health needs and some also have a learning disability. These include general learning disabilities (affecting between 15% and 30% of autistic people^{8,9}), specific learning difficulties (such as dyslexia and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder¹⁰) and other conditions such as epilepsy¹¹. Delays in language development are common in autism¹² and up to 30% of autistic people are non-speaking (completely, temporarily, or in certain contexts). Research also shows that 70% of autistic children have mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder, while 41% have two or more conditions¹³.

The needs of autistic children and young people cut across health, social care and education; they are very individual. Like all young people, autistic young people can have significant areas of strength alongside significant challenges. All these things put autistic young people at the heart of the SEND system. It must work for them if it is to work at all.

The cost-of-living crisis is hitting disabled children and their families harder than most. This sharpens the need to protect the support autistic children rely on to do basic things like go to school. Talk of public spending cuts is frightening for the parents of autistic children. They already describe the ‘fight’ to get essential support for their child, such as a place in a school that won’t exclude them. We need the SEND review to respond to the urgency of the current context and up its game.

It should not be inevitable that autistic children have low attendance at school, are excluded from school, or underachieve. This is not a consequence of autism. This is a consequence of government policy, in particular, where schools policy works against SEND policy. In this report, we set out the key things we need to change so that autistic young people can be themselves and reach their ambitions.

⁷ Department for Education, [Special educational needs and disability \(SEND\)](#). Published June 2022.

⁸ Baron-Cohen, S. et al. [Prevalence of autism spectrum conditions](#). Published 2009.

⁹ Ryzewska, E. et al. [Prevalence of sensory impairments, physical and intellectual disabilities, and mental health in children and young people with self/proxy-reported autism](#). Published 2009.

¹⁰ Russell, G. et al. [Co-Occurrence of Developmental Disorders: Children Who Share Symptoms of Autism, Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#). Published 2013.

¹¹ Woolfenden, S. et al. [A systematic review of two outcomes in autism spectrum disorder - epilepsy and mortality](#). Published 2012.

¹² Lord, C. et al. [Autism spectrum disorder](#). Published 2018.

¹³ Simonoff E. et al. [Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population-derived sample](#), *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 47(4): pp921-929. Published 2008.

³ University of Birmingham Autism Centre for Education and Research. [Investigation of the causes and implications of exclusion for autistic children and young people](#). Published April 2022.

⁴ National Autistic Society. [School Report 2021](#). Published November 2021.

⁵ Department for Education. [GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England Statistics: GCSEs \(key stage 4\)](#). Published March 2022.

⁶ Department for Education, SEND Review: [Right support, right place, right time](#) p5. Published March 2022.

Methodology

In this report we draw on data from a survey completed by 1,867 autistic young people and parents and carers, which was carried out May 3 to June 6 2022. These are responses from people who are confident filling in surveys and reading and writing in English. They may not reflect the experiences of people who would struggle to engage with digital surveys or those who do not have English as a first language.

In addition to the survey, we drew from our direct experience of working with autistic children and young people in the education settings and services we run. We have included quotes and ideas from members of our autistic young people aged 16-25 who play a key role in shaping our policy and campaigning work. We also include quotes and ideas from young people and parents who took part in our virtual feedback sessions about the SEND review, which were attended by Department for Education (DfE) colleagues.

We supplemented our analysis using our extensive evidence bank of quantitative data relating to autism and SEND, from government and other sources.



1. In tough times: Protecting rights and funding or writing off autistic young people?

Key statistics:

- **Over half (57%) of families said that the introduction of tailored lists would result in their child not getting a school placement that works for them.**
- **Only 13% of families think that a national system of funding bands would meet the specific circumstances of different children and young people.**

Summary

The cost-of-living crisis and public spending cuts threaten autistic children and their families more than most. A survey by the Family Fund found that nine out of 10 families with a disabled child are already struggling or falling behind on their regular household bills¹⁴. Against this backdrop, families are scared the SEND review will be a cost-cutting exercise that will write off their children. Building parental confidence in the SEND system - a key aim of the review¹⁵ - requires urgent reassurance from the DfE that it will protect the support families depend on.

The most powerful thing the new Education Secretary could do is commit to upholding the current law that children with SEND rely on for support and to protect the funding that pays for that support. In practice, this means a public commitment to maintain the provisions in Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 and for the high needs budget within the dedicated schools grant to increase in line with inflation over the next three years. This would mean we won't waste time and money re-writing SEND legislation and can instead focus on delivering the change on the ground that will help autistic young people achieve their potential.

1.1 Why families are worried about changes to the SEND system

“What good is it to make new laws when schools are breaking current educational laws about SEN children's right to full time education?” (Parent)

There is widespread agreement that the current SEND system isn't working, as we set out in the introduction. The families we support were keen to hear the government's plan to fix this system. Why, then, are families so concerned now that they have seen the proposals in the SEND review? What are they worried about?

In our focus groups, families talked of their fear that the government would use the SEND review to water down the laws their autistic children depend on for support and for school places. The proposals for 'tailored lists' and new legislation in the form of 'national standards', in particular, have caused concern among young people and parents.

Tailored lists

At the moment, parents of children with SEND who have an EHC plan can request a school for their child based on their own judgement of what would work best. Local authorities must comply with that request, unless the school is “unsuitable”, or placing the child there would be incompatible with “the efficient education of other children, or the efficient use of resources”¹⁶.

Under the proposals set out in the green paper, parents would be given “a tailored list of settings...that the local authority had deemed appropriate to meet the child or young person's needs.” Parents would then have to choose a school from this list, rather than based on their own judgement as now.

While this proposal may be intended to support families, it represents a real threat to many. Over half (57%) of families said that the introduction of tailored lists would not result in their child getting a school place that works for them.

¹⁴ Family Fund, **The Cost of Caring**. Published October 2022.

¹⁵ Department for Education, **SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time**. Published March 2022.

¹⁶ Department for Education and the Department of Health. **Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years**. p172. Published January 2015.

Parents told us:

“Parents know what their child needs so are best placed to make an informed choice.”

“This is once again restricting parental choice.”

“It’s not selecting the school that is the problem; it’s getting the local authority to agree and allocate the place”.

Autistic young people also raised concerns about tailored lists, with some fearing they could limit access to specialist placements for those that need them.

“If the local authorities have more say on where young people go, I fear it could be used forcefully and [young people could] be placed in an inappropriate school for their needs.”

Over 100 parents responding to our survey expressed detailed concerns that a tailored list would reduce their ability to get the right school for their child.

“I fear that this would lead to segregation. I’m concerned that schools with SEN departments would become the only choice even for mainstream education.”

“The list will be the cheapest options for the local authority and an exercise in segregation away from the top performing schools who actively do not want SEN children.”

It was clear from what families told us that they already face significant barriers to getting their child a school place. In chapter two, we look at the disproportionate number of autistic children who are not attending school because they cannot get a place in a school that meets their needs. Restricting school choice to those approved by the local authority would mean families have even less chance of finding a school they can consistently attend.

We are concerned that tailored lists would weaken parental confidence in the SEND system, increase conflict rather than bring benefits and prevent more autistic children from accessing a school that allows them to learn and achieve their potential.

Instead of putting roadblocks in the way of parents looking for a school for their child, we should focus on policy solutions that make more schools autism-inclusive. We set out these solutions below, including workforce development, a stronger SEND focus in Ofsted inspections and wider sharing of expertise between mainstream and special schools.

The ‘elephant in the room’ underpinning the proposal for tailored lists seems to be the growing financial cost of the current SEND system. We discuss this challenge and emerging solutions in the next section. As government seeks to manage pressure on budgets, limiting access to more specialist support may seem like an option to explore. But it is a false economy.

The solution is not to restrict access to the right school or the right support. Much like withholding necessary healthcare treatment, withholding SEND support entrenches difficulties, making them more costly to address in the short, medium and long-term. It makes life harder and more painful for young people and families who miss out on years of learning that can be impossible to recover. This has a knock-on effect on achievement levels, employability and therefore the wider economy. The proposal for tailored lists should be dropped.

National Standards

The other big proposal that families have become increasingly worried about is the introduction of national SEND standards. They are proposed in the green paper as a way of improving consistency and accountability in the SEND system. However, because the government refers to new 'primary legislation', parents fear this means the current legislation protecting their children will be ripped up and rewritten.

There is simply no appetite for wholesale change to the current SEND legislation as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014. Numerous recent independent reports conclude that the Children and Families Act is broadly the right legal framework for SEND, but that, collectively, we have failed to implement it effectively¹⁶. Our research bears this out.

"Make every school and local authority follow the laws already in place!" (Parent)

Since statements of SEN were introduced 40 years ago, families have had a right to have children's additional needs assessed and met. The 2014 Act built on these rights, bringing together support from education, health and care into a single plan -the EHC plan-, for children and young people aged 0-25 who needed it. Any reduction in these protections would undo decades of progress in support for children with additional needs.

To use new national standards to change the current legal framework would be a waste of time and money and needlessly frighten vulnerable families. We see no reason why replacing the Children and Families Act with new national standards would create more accountability than the current legal framework offers.

We urge the government to announce without delay that the protections for children with SEND in Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 will be maintained. This may already be the government's intention but stating it

publicly would give much needed reassurance to thousands of families of children with SEND.

If the national standards can be used instead to give examples of the sort of support children can expect under the current legislation, that would be a welcome way of providing more clarity to families and service providers and reducing conflict. We set out what this might look like in chapter six.

Recommendations:

- **Government drops plans for 'tailored lists'**
- **Government commits to maintaining the Children and Families Act 2014 protections so children can, for example, have their needs assessed and met, and parents can request a school place based on their own judgement.**



1.2 Financial sustainability: Challenges in SEND funding and emerging solutions

The SEND review was prompted in part by a flurry of reports in 2019 questioning the effectiveness of the implementation of the Children and Families Act 2014. The National Audit Office (NAO) concluded that the ‘system for supporting pupils with SEND is not, on current trends, financially sustainable’¹⁷. It highlighted that many local authorities were ‘failing to live within their high needs budgets and meet the demand for support.’ It called on the DfE to ‘act urgently to secure the improvements in quality and sustainability that are needed to achieve value for money’.

We recognise that the SEND review green paper attempts to strike a balance between improving support for children and families and controlling costs. We are concerned that the latter is given too much priority. We welcome the green paper’s commitment to increasing levels of investment in the high needs budget. Families would be very relieved to hear this commitment restated in the context of possible public spending cuts.

Impact of real-terms education, health and care budget reductions

The high needs budget is, however, only part of the financial picture. The green paper does not acknowledge the real-terms reductions in expenditure in other parts of the system – including local authority core budgets, social care, school budgets, and health. These reductions in themselves may have led to increased pressure on the high needs budget. The added impact of recent cost-rises is pushing these services to breaking point.

Research from the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) shows that nine out of 10 schools in England will have run out of money by the next school year, as the enormous burden of increased energy and salary bills takes its toll¹⁸. 50% of heads say their school will be in deficit this year, with almost all expecting to be in the red by next September when their reserves run out. This comes as the Chancellor has made clear that public spending cuts are part of his debt reduction plan and we await news of where those cuts will fall. “There are no easy fixes left,” according to Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the NAHT. “Schools are cut to the bone. This will mean cutting teaching hours, teaching assistants and teachers”¹⁹.

We know that when schools need to make cuts it impacts children with SEND. Research by Ofsted found that 80% of primary headteachers and 72% of secondary headteachers have made changes to the support provided to pupils with SEND because of financial pressure²⁰. For example, schools that Ofsted spoke to described providing fewer out-of-class interventions, focusing support on core subjects and grouping pupils with SEND together.

Why has pressure on the high needs budget increased?

There are several factors. There are a million more under-18s in England now than there were 15 years ago, due to an upward tick in the birth rate in the 2000s and there are more children with complex needs due to advances in neonatal care. We need to be honest that there are simply more children that need support right now.

While the £2.6bn SEND capital funding is a welcome investment, we must see revenue increases so that we can staff the new school places we create and meet the needs of these additional children. The £10k ‘place funding’ (elements 1 and 2) for children in special schools has been static since 2013 and does not reflect inflation. This has led to increased amounts having to be recouped via element 3 ‘top up’ funding in the high needs budget to compensate.

The green paper references increasing demand for EHC plans and special school and college places. We agree that better early intervention for children with SEND may mean more parents could be confident that the right support would be in place for their child in mainstream settings, meaning fewer might seek EHC plans and/or specialist placements. We would welcome further focus on early intervention as the SEND review develops. In chapter two, we set out a raft of wider education policy shifts that would support early intervention and enable more autistic children to learn and achieve in mainstream settings.

Sustainability and value for money

Value for money in SEND is meaningless if we do not look to the long term. Recent government figures point to an annual gain to the wider economy of £31-60bn if we succeed in improving educational achievement in primary schools²¹. A further £34bn per year is the estimated gain from young people

¹⁷ National Audit Office. **Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England**. Published September 2019.

¹⁸ The Guardian. **Exclusive: 90per cent of schools in England will run out of money next year, heads warn**. Published October 2022.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ National Audit Office. **Financial sustainability of schools in England Published** November 2021.

²¹ Department for Education. **‘Opportunity for all’ Schools White Paper**, p7. Published March 2022.

reaching the government's achievement targets at GCSE. National policy recognises the enormous economic benefits of improving the quality of young people's education. It's time we explicitly recognise the benefits of increasing achievement for children with SEND too.

The government's SEND Futures programme began some exciting work looking at long-term value for money studies of SEND spending. One of the limitations of this work was a focus on type of education provider, rather than partnerships that make the most cost-effective use of specialist support. We would be delighted to see the next phase of the SEND Futures programme look at innovative joint approaches between mainstream and special schools and colleges and on what life looks like for SEND children as they become adults.

The latest analysis from the DfE on effective use of high needs budgets points to the importance of genuine co-production with families and of strategic joint-commissioning across education, health and care services²². It reflects that local authorities making the most effective use of their high needs budgets recognise that autism 'is now a 'high incidence' need, which requires effective support and intervention at a range of levels. These authorities have prioritised autism training and support in mainstream schools and made best use of local specialist settings²³.

We must ensure that measures of 'effective use' of budgets prioritise outcomes for children and families, as well as looking at long-term value for money. We are keen to see evaluations continue to be published from government programmes, including the Safety Valve, Better Value, and What Works programmes the DfE has rolled out. Any learning about what delivers good experiences and outcomes for young people and effective use of resources – as well as what doesn't work – should be shared and used.

National banding framework

The government's key proposal to deliver funding sustainability through the SEND review is the introduction of a national banding framework and tariffs. This would 'match levels of need and types of education provision' to specific funding bands, to try to create a cost bracket in which particular types of need or support would fall. The green paper acknowledges how difficult this would be to develop.

In our survey, just 13% of families thought a national system of funding bands would meet the specific circumstances of different children and young people.

"All pupils are different; autism is too complex to fit neatly into bands. This conforms to an outdated idea of mild and severe autism which is not helpful." (Parent)

"Every person is different, and every SEN child is different, trying to standardise need is not achievable. Also need changes as children mature into young adults, care can shift from medical to more support in education and that can change the progress through school levels." (Parent)

In our view, a national banding system that sets out what funding children get depending on 'levels of need and types of education provision' will not improve the sustainability of SEND funding. This is because: It would be inaccurate. A national funding system would need to take a crude view of needs and costs which is unlikely to accurately reflect what resources individual young people, or even types of settings, need on a day-to-day basis. Autistic children and young people within the same setting are likely to have very individual needs. A child's needs are likely to change over time. As they try to settle into a new school or college needs may be higher. As they develop skills the need for additional support may be less. As they experience challenges – with health, mental health, change in circumstance – the need for additional support may increase. Josh McAlister references this challenge in his Independent Care Review for the government, where he dismisses the idea of national banding systems²⁴.

- To improve sustainability, a national banding system would have to exert downward pressure on costs. When provision is based on reducing costs rather than meeting individual needs, it too often leads to poor outcomes for young people and increased costs in the long term. We know from families and our services that 'rationing' in SEND doesn't work. Failing to meet children's needs simply leads to a worsening situation that is damaging for the child, their family and their school – and costs more in the long-run. It is the flip side to early intervention - the vicious cycle of escalating needs the review aims to avoid.

²² Department for Education, [High needs budgets: effective management in local authorities](#), Published June 2022.

²³ Ibid, p11.

²⁴ MacAlister, J. [Independent review of children's social care](#) - final report. Published May 2022.

“The cost to the [local authority] of not meeting needs at grass roots level has meant that to meet needs now, years on, with damage caused by infant neglect and emotional abuse, the need for highly specialised trauma informed educational support is costing over £500,000.” (Parent)

A national banding system also risks perpetuating a binary system that places young people in either ‘mainstream’ or ‘special’ education, requiring one organisation to be able to meet all needs. Instead, we are keen to see a funding system that retains focus on meeting children’s individual needs, but better incentivises collaboration between mainstream and special settings to meet needs earlier and improve funding sustainability.

Thresholds for an EHC plan or special school place

Beyond the national banded funding system, the green paper also proposes clarifying “the circumstances in which a child or young person needs an EHC plan and additionally whether their needs should be met in a specialist setting (including alternative provision)”. This potentially means creating thresholds – a particular level of need that would need to be met for a child to get an EHC plan, or a special school place. This approach misunderstands the nature of special educational needs, particularly for autistic children and young people.

Thresholds would be based on false assumptions that:

- Children with similar needs require the same type of provision,
- Children’s needs are static over time,
- Children with certain needs will stay in either mainstream or special provision for their school career, rather than accessing support flexibly as they need it.

This is why the current system is based on assessment of individual need and a plan which sets out the provision to meet that individual need.

“Children are individuals and shouldn’t be put in funding brackets. Focus on the child not the funding and it will cost less in the long term. Focus on children becoming adults who contribute to society and aren’t dependent on benefits and lifelong mental health services, addiction services or prison services. Invest in their futures. My son could have easily have been failed and had no future but thanks to [school name] he’s at university and not in a mental health ward or prison, that’s the financial savings his EHCP and specialist education gave the economy. He works and lives independently. The cost of that cannot be put in a funding bracket. See the bigger picture of what’s possible.” (Parent).

We cannot support the proposals for a national banded funding framework, nor for thresholds. We must work smarter to create sustainability in SEND funding, not more crudely. We hope that government will shift their thinking following their consultation and ensure that no thresholds will be introduced around what ‘type’ of child would get an EHC plan or a special school place.

Priorities for the SEND funding system

In our view, any changes to SEND funding should be driven by three priorities:

- **Transparency** - so we can see how much SEND funding there is, where it is used and what outcomes are delivered through it.
- **Sufficiency** – so that services have the right funds to meet the needs driven by the current school-age population bulge.
- **Responsiveness** - so that information about where funding leads to positive outcomes is fed back into system design to improve efficiency and sustainability.

We welcome the proposal for joint funding guidance across education, health and care. We suggest this may need to link up with NHS England’s ‘Who Pays?’ guidance²⁵ and guidance for integrated care boards (ICBs)²⁶.

²⁵ NHS England. **Who Pays? Determining which NHS commissioner is responsible for commissioning healthcare services and making payments to providers.** Published July 2022.

²⁶ NHS England. **Integrated Care Systems: guidance.** Published June 2021.

In chapter seven, we look at more cost-effective ways to work towards financial sustainability in the SEND system by meeting needs earlier and within a child's local community, through better use of the existing expertise and resources. We also welcome the recommendations in the DfE's latest analysis of high needs funding use²⁷ to learn from examples of more innovative approaches and suggest that partnerships between mainstream and special settings are a key area for exploration.

Recommendation:

- Plans for national banding should be replaced with funding reforms that prioritise transparency, sufficiency and responsiveness.



1.3 How shifts in the SEND review could help children now

The government is due to share its updated plans for the SEND review shortly. Some shifts in thinking would demonstrate that they are listening to autistic young people's immediate fears of being written off and give families peace of mind that their current protections will not be pulled out from under them at the worst possible time.

Drop the proposal for 'tailored lists'

Tailored lists solve a problem that doesn't exist. The Local Offer, as set out in the SEND Code of Practice, was designed to ensure local authorities clearly communicate with families about the local schools and colleges (and other services) that can meet children's needs. Local authorities can use their Local Offer to direct parents and carers to these schools.

The actual problem underlying the proposal – that of rising costs in the SEND system – will be exacerbated by further limiting parents' choice of school. When children's needs are not met they do not simply go away. They are compounded. This leads to worse experiences for children and families, less learning and achievement and greater costs. Ways of improving SEND funding sustainability are being explored and could be further developed, as we discuss below.

Urgently clarify that the current law will be protected

Government must clarify as soon as possible that the rights in the Children and Families Act 2014 will be protected through the SEND review. This includes families' rights to have an assessment of their child's needs, the provision of support to meet needs and the ability to request a school place.

National standards can then be used to underpin, rather than amend, existing law. Adapting the national standards into 'National Inclusion Standards' would meet the twin aims of improving parental confidence and of providing greater consistency, by spelling out what support children can expect in their local school or college wherever they live. We expand on this in our discussion of improving mainstream support in chapter two.

²⁷ Ibid.

Commit to protecting SEND funding and drop plans for national banding

Against a background of fiscal tightening, we ask government to restate their commitment to protecting and increasing SEND funding through the High Needs Budget. This cuts to the heart of compassionate government – supporting the most vulnerable when difficult spending decisions are being made. Families of autistic children and young people are already struggling. Cutting education funding now would be a false economy. It would shut autistic young people out of education, work and society.

Proposals for national banded funding and other ‘thresholds’ should be dropped. They have been tried before and have failed. They failed because standardised systems cannot effectively predict the complex needs of children with SEND, which change over time and are dependent on environment and circumstances.

Sustainability in SEND funding will be delivered by better support in mainstream schools and colleges through a strong workforce and partnerships with special schools and colleges. This will allow young people to learn, achieve and move into an adulthood, where they live more independently and, for many young people, build successful careers. We urge the SEND review to focus on these routes to sustainability, rather than on trying to force children into ‘bands’ which will not be able to reflect their changing needs. In chapter two, we look at how wider education policy can support this shift.

Recommendations:

- **Government commits to upholding the protections in Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014.**
- **Plans for ‘tailored lists’ are dropped.**
- **Plans for national banding are replaced with funding reforms that prioritise transparency, sufficiency and responsiveness.**
- **The promised real terms increases in the high needs budget are restated and delivered.**

2. Are autistic children written off at school?

Key statistics:

- **65% of parents of an autistic child in mainstream education were not happy with their education.**
- **Only 35% of autistic young people attending mainstream schools feel listened to when decisions are being made about the support they get in education.**
- **36% of autistic young people said they had been out of education when they would have liked to have been at school.**

Aside from the proposals in the SEND review green paper, autistic young people had lots of thoughts about how general school policies could evolve to help them achieve better at school.

Our research found that autistic children and young people are being written off at school because government education policy actively works against government policy on SEND. If the reforms proposed in the SEND green paper are to truly ensure that children and young people get the right support, in the right place and at the right time, it needs to make sure schools policy works with SEND policy. This requires a clear expectation that every school is a SEND school, every teacher is a SEND teacher and that every policy is a SEND policy.

The DfE focus on attainment targets, punitive attendance measures and strict behaviour policies will not deliver the right education for autistic young people. We need all education policy to make schools more inclusive so that autistic young people can achieve their potential.

This chapter sets out how consideration of SEND must be central to government policies on attainment, attendance, behaviour and exclusions, ultimately changing schools’ culture so autistic young people feel listened to and included in school – and have better outcomes.

2.1 Attainment and achievement

The narrow definition of success in education, centred around achieving expected grades in English and Maths, penalises autistic children before they even reach the age of 11. We need to value the achievements of all children, not just those that meet age-related targets and stop excluding, rejecting and belittling children and young people whose achievements are not textbook. The government must place an equivalent emphasis on inclusion, achievement and attainment and recognise that inclusion is a driving factor in improving attainment for all young people in the wider education system.

“I feel like I’m failing and not good enough. I’m a slow worker and takes double the effort just to do an average job.” (Autistic young person)

When it comes to attainment, figures from the DfE show that 20.4% of autistic children achieve grade 5 or above in English and mathematics GCSEs, compared to 51.9% of all pupils²⁸. It should not be inevitable that autistic young people underachieve. It is a consequence of government policy which focuses on improving grades, without considering why autistic young people are falling behind and how education needs to adapt to support them to achieve.

The central aim of the government’s Schools White Paper is ‘levelling up’ by increasing attainment in English and Maths. We know that children with SEND currently have lower achievement rates in school. If schools’ priorities are to ensure pupils achieve stringent academic targets, then without proper accountability, young people with SEND will continue to be pushed to the margins and the cycle of exclusion will continue. Low attainment is not inevitable and can be improved if we provide the right support to attend school, engage in learning and avoid exclusion. Consideration of SEND must be central to education policy, including attainment, attendance and behaviour policy. Unfortunately, the government’s view during parliamentary debate on the Schools Bill was that any concerns about the support for pupils with SEND should only be raised through the SEND review, rather than in connection with the Bill. Without proper join up, neither the SEND Review nor the Schools Bill will have the desired impact on improving children’s lives, achievement and inclusions, or on managing costs effectively.

“A more radical thought would be to overhaul the mainstream system so that it is more supportive not just of our children but of all children AND the staff working there too. Where social emotional education, self awareness, the modelling and expectation of decent behaviour and not only education about mental health, but time given to allow for the fostering of good mental health, is given equal status to academic achievement. If that were to happen then there would be a lot less need for specialist provision in the first place.” (Parent)

You cannot improve education for all children until you value the achievement of all children – including those with SEND – and hold schools to account for delivering them. There is also a very real danger that the pressure to hit the attainment targets set out in the Schools Bill will impact on the resources and support available to help SEND pupils.

For many autistic young people, grades alone are not enough to ensure they are able to achieve and thrive after school. We cannot focus solely on attainment without also supporting their wider needs. We have seen this first-hand within our own settings. We receive referrals to our specialist college for learners who have achieved Maths and English GCSEs, but who cannot travel independently or need support with executive function and communication. They often need greater preparation and support for transition to adulthood and potential employment.

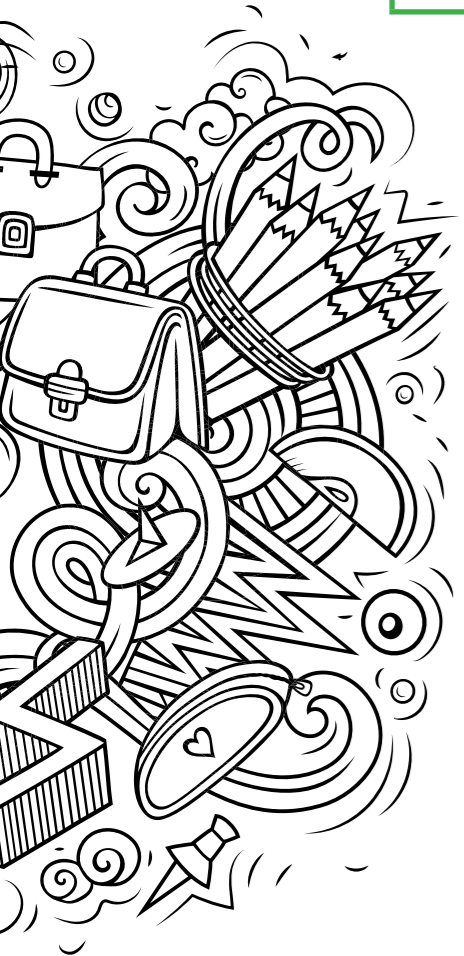
“Successful outcomes are not always how many 9s or A* a school gets. Schools need to change their outlook, be overhauled and made more inclusive, that way if inclusivity is taught at primary school the senior school years may not be as difficult. Let’s respect differences.” (Parent)

²⁸ Department for Education. [GCSE and equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England Statistics](#) Published March 2022.

“Go back to a process of every child matters. At the moment the idea is that every child should achieve a minimum grade. This is COMPLETELY different to ‘every child should achieve their potential’!! If a child is bright but is hindered from accessing the curriculum because of their SEN this will be completely ignored if they are reaching national minimum standards.” (Parent)

Recommendations:

- **Make all education policy work for SEND pupils so they can achieve their potential with a clear expectation that every school is a SEND school, every teacher is a SEND teacher, and every policy is a SEND policy.**
- **Review national attainment measures to ensure they incentivise progress for all children, do not exclude the achievements of children with SEND and consider use of destination measures as part of this.**



2.2 Behaviour and exclusions

School is simply not working for many autistic pupils. They are being written off and shut out of education. Exclusions of autistic children and young people have more than doubled in the last ten years, from 2,282 in 2010 to 5,988 in 2021. Autistic pupils are twice as likely to be regularly and unlawfully excluded from school for a fixed term than those who do not have SEND.

Many autistic pupils also experience ‘informal’ exclusions. This includes being prevented from taking part in school trips, being placed on indefinite part-time timetables, being sent home after a period of challenging behaviour to ‘cool off’, or being taught exclusively in an isolation room away from other pupils. These lost opportunities to socialise with their peers and feelings of being ‘singled out’ can have a deep and long-lasting psychological impact on pupils and interfere with their social, emotional and mental health development. Over a third (36%) of the young people we surveyed said they had been out of education when they would have liked to have been at school.

“My child has experienced many exclusions linked to his behaviour because his needs weren’t being met both in primary and secondary settings. He has also had to have mental health days as his mental health has suffered from being labelled naughty. We have also experienced years of school avoidance from him.” (Parent)

Not only do exclusions cause disruption and isolation for pupils, the impact is also felt by their families. One-fifth of parents of autistic children have had to give up their job or reduce their working hours due to the unlawful exclusion of their child. As well as being devastating for the young person and family, this has a knock-on effect on the economy. Yet 34% of teachers and school leaders surveyed admit to unlawfully excluding children with autism.

“He is frequently excluded for the rest of the day if he is becoming too stressed. That means someone always has to be home in case the school rings,” (Parent)

We have fed into the government's exclusions guidance before but by the point exclusion is considered, it's often too late. Exclusions need to be seen as a last resort and only considered if the pupil is putting staff or another child's safety at risk, rather than in response to "misbehaviour". We are encouraged to see Southwark Council already introducing a policy along these lines and, as a result, Southwark schools did not exclude any students during the 2021 autumn term.

"My son has had 7 fixed-term exclusions in this academic year, for unsafe behaviour and aggressive meltdowns. Many of the triggers for these behaviours were directly caused by the school not understanding his sensory needs. They have since improved their understanding and put measures in place to prevent him from being permanently excluded." (Parent)

But preventing exclusions requires schools to become more inclusive in all aspects of school life. Rigid, inflexible and strict behaviour policies that do not take into account how the school environment can negatively impact autistic pupils will fail to reduce distress behaviours and will prevent all pupils from being able to learn. For example, rules about not being allowed in corridors during lesson times can be impossible for autistic pupils to comply with if they need a break from an overwhelming environment due to their sensory needs. They may use behaviours that are challenging to escape a difficult environment, which simply result in more disciplinary and exclusionary action against them, such as detentions or fixed term exclusions.

Recommendation:

- **National Inclusion Standards should set out how behaviour policies can be made inclusive, with an emphasis on engaging with each individual pupil to understand their difficulties and the kind of support they need.**

2.3 Attendance

Autistic young people tell us they desperately want to go to school just like everyone else, but they are being shut out and written off because of inaccessible school environments and teaching. Research has shown that less than half of autistic children and young people say they are happy in school²⁹.

Latest figures show that 43,040 (30.1%) autistic pupils were persistent absentees in 2020/21³⁰ – that's nearly a third of all autistic pupils. If the government is serious about improving outcomes and attendance for young people with SEND, there needs to be further consideration of the reasons behind the low attendance of autistic pupils.

"If teachers listened to me. If I had been believed. If bullying was taken seriously. Students don't drop out of college for no reason. Students don't skip school just because they're lazy. Being intelligent and good at academic skills was all I had really, so when that is taken away you really are left with nothing."
(Autistic young person)

A UCL study conducted during the pandemic revealed that autistic children and children with a learning disability have poor attendance, or even deregister from school, due to unmet special education needs, lack of flexibility, bullying and mental health and wellbeing difficulties³¹. The researchers found that Covid-19 only had a limited impact on school attendance, as physical health risks overall were not a major barrier to school attendance. Instead, up to 31% of school attendance barriers were linked to unmet need. The study surveyed over 1,200 parents of autistic children and children with learning disabilities aged 5-15 in May 2021.

"In year 9 I stopped attending school completely because of anxiety and the school not looking after my needs."
(Autistic young person)

In the past, attendance guidance has focused on measures aimed at changing parents' attitudes and approaches. Instead, the responsibility needs to shift onto schools to create an inclusive environment, with the guidance

²⁹ National Autistic Society. **School Report 2021**. Published November 2021.

³⁰ Department for Education. **Statistics: Pupil Absence**. Published March 2022.

³¹ Learning Disability Today. **Growing number of children with a learning disability deregistering from school**. Published October 2022.

focusing on ways schools can support all pupils to attend school and have their needs met there. The government's recent 'working together to improve school attendance' guidance is a move in the right direction, particularly acknowledging the need to remove the in-school barriers pupils face. For example, considering support or reasonable adjustments for uniform, transport, routines, access to support in school and lunchtime arrangements.

"Her needs aren't being met otherwise she would be more able to attend but no one seems to be able to advise how to help or deal with it. All I get told is that she needs to be in school, like I've not tried everything to get her there, and the famous question 'How will she cope when she leaves school and has to start work?' Exactly. That's why these kids need recognition now!" (Parent)

"He was unable to cope with the school[s] environment, lack of appropriate support etc. and couldn't attend. We were targeted by our local council due to 'poor attendance', sent to the Reporters Service and eventually court. We had to defend ourselves with legal representation and were thankfully totally vindicated. This happened twice. We have been left suffering from trauma due to this." (Parent)

With early intervention and the right support, schools can take an approach which proactively supports attendance rather than punishing absence. This preventative approach would be far more successful at driving down absence rates among pupils with SEND.

Recommendations:

- **Make school attendance policies more inclusive by providing the right support to pupils with SEND. Encourage the adoption of a whole school approach to promoting positive mental wellbeing so all pupils feel able to attend and fully participate in all aspects of school life.**
- **Rather than penalising absence, attendance guidance should emphasise the importance of working with persistent absentees to identify, understand and address the underlying causes of their poor attendance.**

2.4 Culture

We know that too many autistic pupils are not receiving the right support at the right time at school, particularly in mainstream schools. Many of these issues could be avoided by taking an individual approach and involving young people in decisions and discussions on how best to support them. When decisions were being made about the support they get in education, our survey found only 35% of young people attending mainstream schools felt listened to, compared with 83% in alternative provision and 75% attending special schools.

"The two mainstreams we tried often refused to make reasonable adjustments. The first told us she needed assessment for SEN but that they couldn't do anything [until] a diagnosis was actually made. The wait was 18 months and she was already unable to attend and hugely distressed." (Parent)

"More acceptance of neurodivergent people rather than feeling as if they are 'extra work' or a 'burden'." (Parent)

A lack of understanding of autism, both by their peers and school staff, has a significant impact on the experiences of young people in school. Children with SEND report feeling lonely at school, with 43% of disabled children saying that they do not have any friends who they feel close enough to that they could call on them for help³². Less than one in 12 (8%) autistic children and young people think other pupils and students know enough about autism³³. Meanwhile, six in 10 autistic young people say the main thing that would make school better for them would be having a teacher who understood autism³⁴. We discuss the need for improved training and workforce development in detail in chapter five.

Recommendations:

- **Ensure national inclusion standards reinforce the need for an inclusive culture, SEND training for school leaders and whole school approaches to SEND.**
- **Make all education policy work for SEND pupils so they can achieve their potential, with a clear expectation that every school is a SEND school, every teacher is a SEND teacher and every policy is a SEND policy.**

³² Disabled Children's Partnership. **Then There Was Silence**. Published September 2021.

³³ National Autistic Society. **School Report 2021**. Published November 2021.

³⁴ APPG on Autism. **The Autism Act: 10 years on**. Published September 2019.

3. How can we tackle the mental health crisis and improve the wellbeing of autistic young people?

Summary

Many autistic children and young people describe feeling different from their peers as they grow up and experiencing social exclusion or bullying. Sadly, for many, a lack of understanding and support results in mental health problems.

Autism is not a mental health condition, but research shows that 70% of autistic children have mental health problems such as depression, anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder, while 41% have two or more conditions³⁵.

Through our work with young people and our research, we know that autistic young people struggle to access support that meets their needs. A survey of over 11,000 autistic people and their families by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Autism found that 82% of autistic adults and 86% of families found the process of getting support from mental health services took too long³⁶. Meanwhile only 14% of autistic adults and 11% of families said there were enough mental health services in their area to meet their needs³⁷.

In this section, we look at the impact of poor support on young people's mental health and the changes that are needed to improve the situation.

3.1 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

Waiting times for support from CAMHS are far too long. Children, young people and their families are being left to struggle on their own, often leading to an avoidable deterioration of mental health and an increased likelihood of reaching a crisis point.

“We have been on the CAHMS waiting list for nearly a year we've had to call the crisis team due to my daughter's suicidal tendencies.” (Parent)

Mental health professionals do not understand enough about autism. Many autistic young people have been refused treatment as their mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, are written off and attributed to their autism by CAMHS. Mental health staff need mandatory training on autism, co-produced meaningfully with autistic young people and their parents/carers. The Oliver McGowan training³⁸, which is now compulsory for all CQC registered settings, is an important start. But we need to look at tailored training for mental health staff to ensure they understand the different presentation of mental health needs they might see in autistic young people. Mental health professionals also need support to better communicate with autistic people, understand their individual needs and tailor the support they are offered.

“I'd been struggling with suicidal thoughts and self-harm and I was referred to CAMHS after a hospital stay. However, I found that it only made it worse because they didn't understand me and my autism and how to adapt their services to me.” (Autistic young person)

Many of the therapies available on the NHS simply don't work for autistic children and young people. Talking therapies and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can be difficult to access due to differences in social communication. Autistic young people and their families tell us they want access to alternative therapies and treatments, beyond medication and talking therapies, which might better suit their needs, such as art therapy, social prescribing and support groups.

“Online counselling was put in place by CAMHS. This was very unsuccessful. It was for a time limited period. He had no time to get to know the therapist who pushed him too hard and this resulted in him refusing to engage.” (Parent)

Young people are struggling with a lack of support after an autism diagnosis and there are often limited opportunities to access help and advice. They want access to peer support and information to help them understand what autism means for them and learn about coping strategies and co-occurring

³⁵ Simonoff E. et al. **Psychiatric disorders in children with autism spectrum disorders: prevalence, comorbidity, and associated factors in a population-derived sample**, Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 47(4): pp921-929 Published 2008.

³⁶ APPG on Autism. **The Autism Act: 10 years on**. Published September 2019.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Health Education England. **The Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism**. Updated November 2022.

mental health conditions. Ambitious about Autism has a model of post-diagnostic peer support for young people which could be piloted, funded and commissioned to fill this gap.

When they reach adulthood, many autistic young people experience a sudden decrease in the amount of help and support available. Criteria for accessing support are often different for child and adult services, with adult services requiring individuals to be in crisis. Many young autistic people are falling through the cracks, facing long waiting lists for adult mental health services and losing access to the regular support they received as children. As young people lose the support of CAMHS on their eighteenth birthday, this upheaval happens in year 13 when many are making final preparations for their A Levels or are in the process of taking them. The impact of this sudden loss of support at such a critical time can have a devastating effect on exam results and therefore life chances.

“When I left CAMHS I was transferred to the adult mental health services but they dismissed me because I was autistic so they couldn’t help.” (Autistic young person)

Recommendations:

- **Reduce waiting times for CAMHS by improving the sufficiency and capability of staff and services. This should form a key part of the review of health staff needed to support the SEND population, as proposed in the SEND review.**
- **Increase autism expertise in mental health services so that professionals have a better understanding of autism, building on the success of the Oliver McGowan mandatory training pilot. The requirement for CQC registered providers to train employees must be implemented and funded.**
- **NHS England to ensure local areas offer alternatives to talking therapy and CBT that might be more appropriate for some autistic children and young people, such as art therapies and social prescribing.**
- **NHS England to fund and commission pre and post-diagnosis support services that improve wellbeing for autistic young people, based on learning from our model.**
- **Stop autistic children and young people losing access to mental health support in the transition to adult services by extending the upper age limit for CAMHS to 25, establishing a joined-up 0-25 system across education, health and social care.**

3.2 Education and mental health

Experiences of being written off by the education system are exacerbating mental health problems for many autistic young people. School and education are a major part of a child or young person’s life. Getting education right for autistic children and young people is key to improving their mental wellbeing and preventing avoidable mental health problems, crises and inpatient admissions. In our survey, young people reported having mental health crises because of their experiences at school.

“I was suspended for two days, then I bunked off school for a day once (and got caught), then I avoided the last day of school because I didn’t feel like celebrating with everyone, in fact I tried to commit suicide but luckily failed, so I packed my bag with a tent, sleeping bag, clothes and some tinned food and got on the first train and then the first bus and ended up in North Wales, where I found a field and camped there, planning on starting a new life on my own. My parents called the police and then came to get me the next day, but it shows how traumatised I was, to want to completely restart my life at age 16.” (Autistic young person)

Many autistic children and young people are missing out on school due to poor mental health, with our research highlighting situations where a child could not attend school due to anxiety. We found that many children are very unwell and for this reason, rather than exclusion, they are not attending school.

The government must take steps to make the system more inclusive to enable autistic pupils to learn, thrive and achieve at school. Autistic young people tell us they want to see a greater emphasis on mental health and promoting positive wellbeing in schools. We need a values shift, where wellbeing is seen as just as important as attainment and attendance, with a whole-school approach to promoting positive wellbeing.

“I think schools should treat mental health with more respect, but at the same time I do believe that schools are set up to prioritise top grades and achievements more than mental health.” (Autistic young person)

Autistic young people say they want more mental health support in schools that meets their needs. Ambitious about Autism is developing a national programme to support the mental health of autistic pupils in mainstream secondary schools. The programme aims to reach thousands of autistic young people in the UK and will also provide support and guidance to thousands of parents and caregivers to help them proactively care for their mental wellbeing.

The new programme, 'Autistic and OK', will pioneer ground-breaking autism acceptance toolkits for secondary schools to provide resources for autistic pupils, non-autistic peers and teachers. The toolkit will empower autistic young people with the knowledge and self-awareness to proactively look after their own mental wellbeing before reaching crisis point.

Improving the wellbeing of autistic young people is essential for them to stay in education, make friends, find work and thrive. Progress on attainment, school attendance and employment rates won't happen unless children and young people feel well and able to participate in schools and their communities.

While long-term wholesale change is needed to adequately address the root causes of poor mental health among autistic young people, the government must take urgent actions to avert this crisis. We desperately need the government to reduce waiting times, provide autism training for mental health staff and offer more immediate forms of support such as walk-in 'hubs' and helplines.

Recommendations:

- **The Department for Health and Social Care should work with the DfE to ensure that new legislation, such as the Schools Bill and other proposals such as the SEND review, are joined up to ensure schools, colleges, health and social care services are meeting the mental health needs of autistic young people.**
- **Consider expanding early intervention autism-inclusive mental health support, such as funding and expanding early support hubs, mental health first aid training in schools, helplines for advice and support groups.**

4. How can we boost employability and support the move into adulthood?

Summary

The education system is writing off autistic young people by not providing them with the skills, qualifications and support they need to make the transition to employment. Young people leaving school then face many barriers to entering the workplace, including a lack of access to good quality careers advice, inflexible hiring practices and non-inclusive workplace cultures.

We need to be more ambitious about what autistic children and young people can achieve in the workplace. We propose that the support children and young people receive at school should be extended to improve their transitions to adulthood to help them get a job, rather than starting from scratch with government programmes designed to get disabled people "back" into work. Employers also need to embrace neurodiversity by making their recruitment processes more accessible, offering work experience programmes to autistic young people and making adjustments to support autistic employees.

4.1 Autism and the transition to employment

Just 29% of autistic adults are in work, compared with 53.5% of disabled people and 81.6% of non-disabled people³⁹. In 2021, the median pay for autistic people was 33% less than non-disabled employees without a long-lasting health condition⁴⁰. Disabled employees who identified autism as their main condition had a wider pay gap than those with other types of disability⁴².

³⁹ Office for National Statistics. [Outcomes for Disabled People in the UK –2021](#). Published February 2022.

⁴⁰ Office for National Statistics. [Disability pay gaps in the UK: 2021](#). Published April 2022.

⁴² Ibid.

This is not due to a lack of ambition or desire to work. In our 2021 employment survey, 71% of autistic young people said they wanted to work but less than a third said they were confident they would be able to find work within the next year⁴³.

Hiring practices and non-inclusive workplace environments serve to block many young people from entering the workplace. Autistic young people tell us that anxiety about application and interview processes not being accessible to them is the biggest barrier to them finding work.

“Our children with special needs are miracles and the right support at the right time can make them into adults contributing to the NI and Tax system. They want to stand on their own feet and be independent and want to pay back into the system that has helped them. Please ensure that they get the right support instead of making them fail and causing them emotional distress and making them feel like failures.” (Parent)

Employment, Health and Care plans

At the moment, we lose all the gains autistic young people make in school and further education, by ending the support of an EHC plan just at the point where they leave education and look for work. Under the current system, we then try very hard to get disabled people ‘back into work’ through DWP schemes. This does not make sense and we need to bridge that gap between education and employment support. Families and young people who responded to our survey told us they need support to prepare for the next stage of transition.

“Support, communication and organisation always helps with transitioning to the next thing.” (Autistic young person)

Creating 0-25 plans was a bold move intended to ‘extend the runway’ for young people with SEND. But young people need support with getting off the ground and into the world of work. While we welcomed the proposal in the DWP Health and Disability green paper to trial employment and health support plans, much of what would be in these plans would already be emerging in a young person’s EHC plan.

We would like to see EHC plans evolve to become Employment and Health and Care plans, once a young person is ready to begin the transition into work. That way, we could update the existing information about a young person’s support needs and aspirations contained in their EHC plan, rather than letting all that information drop away and starting a new assessment process from scratch for the world of work.

Recommendation:

- **EHC plans to evolve to become Employment, Health and Care plans (or employment and health support plans), once a young person is ready to make the transition from education to employment.**

Adjustment passports

The proposal to create adjustment passports was welcomed by our survey respondents, with 80% of parents and 87% of young people saying that it would help autistic young people reach their next goal after education⁴⁴.

“I think it will just save me a lot of breath. Right now, I have to explain my story to everyone I come across, and it’s exhausting. It would be much easier to not have to talk about it all the time and have it like a broken record.” (Autistic young person)

Some respondents felt that an adjustment passport might just lead to more discrimination and stigma. Adjustment passports, while welcome, are not the full solution. They must be part of a greater support package for young people and wider changes to educate and encourage employers to recruit and better support young people with SEND.

For passports to be effective, employers need to change their practices and attitudes so that autistic young people can feel confident disclosing their disability and asking for the support they need. This is demonstrated by the findings of our 2021 survey, where over a fifth of respondents said they do not tell potential employers they are autistic because they are afraid of being treated unfairly, with over 70% saying they do not disclose due to fear of discrimination⁴⁵. Even when they do disclose and request adjustments during the application process, only 16% said employers always provide them at the interview⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ Survey by Ambitious about Autism of over 500 autistic young people and their parents and carers undertaken in 2021.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴³ Survey by Ambitious about Autism of over 500 autistic young people and their parents and carers undertaken in 2021.

“Passports are only as effective as the employer’s willingness to read and act upon them. Needs to be accompanied by more education for employers to see that it’s worth their while. Young people with SEND can be loyal, hardworking, productive employees!”
(Autistic young person)

“I worry that if I disclose my autism in a job application/in the workplace, I will be mistreated, face discrimination or be put in uncomfortable situations.”
(Autistic young person)

If passports are introduced, they cannot be a static document. Respondents to our survey highlighted that a passport would need to be reviewed and updated regularly as young people say their needs can often change. Just because someone did not have an adjustment in place in their previous workplace, does not mean they would not need it in their next one.

Passports could also form part of an overall support and adjustment package for young people with an EHC plan, if they can be integrated into employment, health and care plans.

Recommendation:

- **Access to Work Adjustment Passports to be embedded in an updated SEND Code of Practice and in the new National Inclusion Standards.**

4.2 Careers advice

For young people with SEND to access employment, it is essential that they have access to high-quality careers guidance which is tailored to their needs and identifies all the options and support available. Careers advisors should receive specific training to enable them to support young people with SEND. Young people with SEND need careers advisors who can help build their confidence and understand their particular needs to help them meet their aspirations.

In our 2021 employment survey, 43% of respondents who had received careers advice felt their advisor did not understand them or their needs⁴⁷. Some young people told us the advice they received was too general and others said their advisors were not being ambitious enough about what they can achieve, encouraging them into low-skill or poorly paid roles.

We have worked in partnership with the Careers Development Institute to create training courses specifically for information, advice and guidance (IAG) professionals working with autistic people. The training aims to increase understanding of autism and how it can impact people in different ways. It outlines practical ways for how IAG professionals can ensure their careers conversations with autistic clients create a relationship of trust and an understanding of common goals.

More also needs to be done to improve and promote the Disability Confident scheme amongst employers, education professionals and young people. Focus group data has suggested young people lack awareness of the scheme which could provide them with greater optimism about applying for work. Careers advisors need to make sure that young people with SEND know about DWP schemes such as Access to Work and Disability Confident.

Universities should not be forgotten in this. Autistic graduates are the least likely of all disabled graduates to be in full-time employment and the most likely to be unemployed at all qualification levels⁴⁸. They are also the most likely to be in low-paid, insecure work, including internships and zero-hours contracts. These disappointing outcomes are not a true reflection of the potential of autistic graduates but a sign that autistic students need better support from universities and employers to reach their potential.

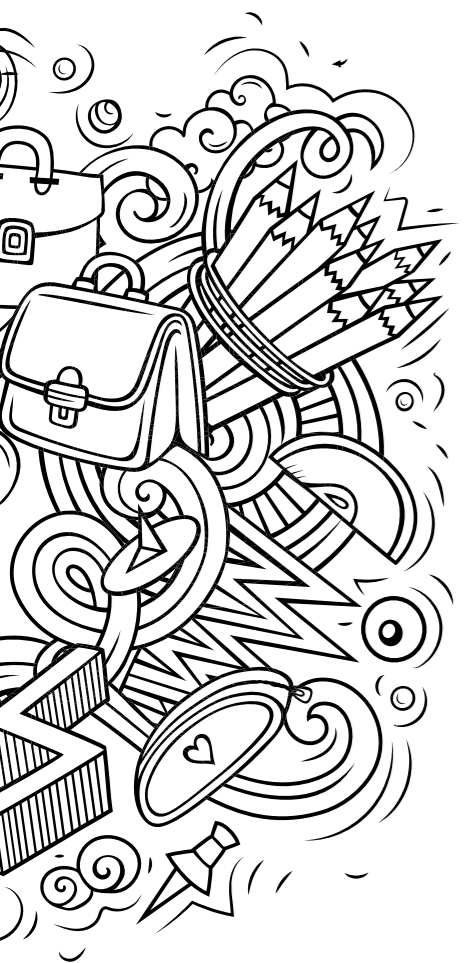
⁴⁷ Survey by Ambitious about Autism of over 500 autistic young people and their parents and carers undertaken in 2021.

⁴⁸ The Association of Graduates Careers Advisory Services. **What Happens Next? 2021**. Published February 2021.

To break down barriers and improve outcomes for autistic graduates, our **Higher Education Network**, in partnership with Santander, worked with 17 universities across England and Wales to train careers staff to help them support their autistic pupils and provide paid internship opportunities. It could provide a model for other higher education providers to adopt.

Recommendation:

- **Schools, colleges and universities should provide mandatory tailored careers guidance to disabled young people, including the provision of information about schemes such as Access to Work, Disability Confident, supported internships and other employment schemes.**



4.3 Supported internships, apprenticeships, and employment programmes

Autistic young people need more opportunities to prove themselves in the workplace and build confidence. Access to high quality work experience is an essential opportunity for young people with SEND to gain practical experience. For work experience programmes to be effective, employers need training on how to support disabled employees.

We welcome the £18 million investment to double the capacity of supported internships. We run our own successful **supported internship programme** at Ambitious College, based at the Whittington Hospital in North London.

A recent graduate of our programme said:

“I feel that I have gained more confidence and experience in the working environment and have a better understanding of the type of role and working environment would suit me best.”

However, in addition to expanding the programme, there are number of other ways in which it could be reformed to make it an even better opportunity for young people with EHC plans. The programme could be improved to make it more likely for interns to find permanent employment once they have completed their placement. For example, additional funding could also be used to provide follow-up support for people who have completed internships but are still looking for work, such as job coaching, interview and CV workshops.

“So many of my friends have ended up unemployed after supported internships. I fell off the end of my supported internship and then there was no support.”

Currently supported internships are unpaid which is not in line with other work experience opportunities or apprenticeships. Supported internships could be made equivalent to apprenticeships, which are currently paid at a minimum hourly rate of £4.30. If placements are not paid, as a minimum employers should be required to cover travel, lunch and uniform expenses.

We also run a range of employment programmes, including Employ Autism, an award-winning programme that offers support through careers information, guidance, paid work experience opportunities and training for employers who participate in the programme. The programme started in partnership with the Civil Service. We have developed a model which provides support that is accessible to autistic young people, helps careers advisers develop inclusive practice and creates meaningful pathways to supported employment. Through the programme, autistic young people undertake paid work experience placements with employers to help them take their first steps on the career ladder. Employers offering the programme are trained on how to make adjustments to support autistic interns.

“Our son has gone through the process of your internship programme, and I thought that the whole process was so well managed. He will be doing an internship this summer with the Civil Service and he is really looking forward to it. The process in my opinion was well thought of and it would be wonderful to see it rolled out to all organisations hiring young people with special needs.” (Parent)

It is important that all work experience and training programmes meet the needs and requirements of young people with SEND. To make sure this happens, we would like to see all new government employment and training programmes undergo Equality Impact Assessment prior to launch, outlining how they will be inclusive and accessible to disabled young people.

Apprenticeships are an important route into employment for many young people, but more needs to be done to improve access for young people with SEND. We are disappointed that six years after the Maynard Review was published (and the government accepted its recommendations in full), its recommendations have still not been fully implemented⁵⁰. We urge the DfE to prioritise implementing the recommendations to make apprenticeships more accessible to people with a learning disability.

We would like to see better joined-up policy between the DfE and DWP in relation to disabled young people’s outcomes. We need better links between DWP funded programmes and education providers to stop young people falling into a gap between provision.

We need more flexible solutions that will enable autistic young people to access jobs in a way that is sustainable and meaningful for them. This includes support to transition from school to employment and tailored careers advice delivered by professionals who understand their needs and adjustments that are understood, respected and embedded within all workplaces.

By overlooking autistic young people, employers are missing out on talent and innovation as young autistic individuals have many unique qualities and diverse perspectives to bring to the workplace. Autistic young people want to work but need the right support from their school and employers to access employment and thrive in the workplace.

Recommendation:

- All new employment and training programmes from the DfE and the DWP should have an Equality Impact Assessment prior to launch, outlining how they will be inclusive and accessible to young people with SEND.
- Implement the Maynard Review recommendations to improve access to apprenticeships for people with a learning disability.



⁵⁰Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions. [Paul Maynard taskforce recommendations](#). Published July 2016.

5. Do we have the workforce we need for autistic children and young people to achieve?

Key statistics:

- **73% of young people felt that their teachers did not understand their needs.**
- **Nearly 100% of families thought that education staff should have specific training on autism.**

Summary

We support proposals in the SEND review to improve the workforce, such as research into the gaps in the health workforce in relation to SEND. But these isolated ideas need to be developed into a cohesive plan for a skilled and valued SEND workforce across education, health and care, backed by funding and with clear dates and targets. This includes the reinstatement of autism in initial teacher training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and a target for all schools to be whole-school autism trained.

5.1 Education workforce

“There needs to be a strategy to work towards culture change within education. Too often, teachers are unaware of the rights of the child to have adaptations made, in line with equality legislation. This leaves parents having to fight for their child’s rights. They are not doing the children a favour, they are providing that which the children have a right to - a suitable education.” (Parent)

Understanding autism

One of the biggest factors in determining how well an autistic child succeeds and makes progress at school is how well their autism is understood by their teachers. Our own research found that 95% of autistic children and young people felt that teachers need specific training on autism and 73% felt that their teachers did not understand their needs. Training in autism for staff was the highest priority among families responding to our survey, when asked what should be included in the national standards.

Teachers are clear that they want this training, especially in autism. In the APPGA’s Autism and Education in England report, fewer than five in 10 teachers said that they felt confident about supporting a child on the autism spectrum⁵¹. With 70% of autistic children attending mainstream schools, every teacher will have autistic pupils in their class during their career.

Young people wanted their teachers to understand:

“That everyone with autism is different and has different needs and are good at different things.”
(Autistic young person)

“With specific autism training, teachers would be able to improve the ‘quality of life’ for autistic students in education, better understand their needs and emotional reactions. It would foster an environment where autistic students would not have to worry about judgement from the teacher. However, this would only be successful if the autism training was accurate, in depth and applicable (e.g. covers masking, how autism varies in autistic people, how a negative emotional reaction does not equal misbehaving).” (Autistic young person)

The responsibility cannot be placed only on school special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs). The National SENCO Workforce Survey 2018-2020⁵² estimated that 55% of primary SENCOs and 70% of secondary SENCOs were not allocated enough time to complete their role effectively. Over three-quarters of primary and secondary SENCOs said they were routinely pulled away from their role to perform other duties.

⁵¹ Survey of over 11,000 autistic people and their families for the **APPG report: The Autism Act: 10 years on**. Published 2019

⁵² Bath Spa University and nasen. **National Senco Workforce Survey 2020**. Published 2021

Initial Teacher Training (ITT)

We need to start with enhancing Initial Teacher Training (ITT) to ensure that all teachers are equipped to teach pupils with SEND right from the start of their career. We were disappointed to find no mention of this in the green paper. We want all teachers to come out of initial teacher training with a good understanding of what SEND looks like, what a school should ordinarily be providing, the Equality Act and where to go for resources.

To improve understanding of autism among all teachers and provide them with the tools they need to help their pupils reach their potential, autism-specific training needs to be added back into requirements for ITT programmes. The 2016 Framework required that *“Providers should ensure that trainees understand the principles of the SEND Code of Practice, are confident working with the four broad areas of need it identifies and are able to adapt teaching strategies to ensure that pupils with SEND (including, but not limited to, autism...) can access and progress within the curriculum. Providers should ensure that SEND training is integrated across the ITT programme⁵³.”*

These requirements are missing from current ITT Core Content Framework. In its own words, the new framework “deliberately does not detail approaches specific to particular additional needs”⁵⁴. Considering the fact that exclusion rates for autistic children are increasing, attendance rates are decreasing and home education for these pupils is on the rise, we feel the decision to remove autism from the core content framework needs urgent review.

Introducing autism-specific training back into ITT would ultimately lead to a more confident and inclusive workforce, which may allow more autistic children to have their needs met in mainstream schools. The green paper acknowledges the need for consistent standards to facilitate a more inclusive system. If any new standards are introduced because of this review, staff will need training to understand how they affect their work and how to enact any changes effectively and efficiently.

The green paper also acknowledged that the challenges in the current system are *“driven by a vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence from parents, carers and providers, and inefficient allocation of support which is driving the spiralling costs in the system. This begins in early years and*

mainstream schools where, despite the best endeavours of the workforce, settings are frequently ill-equipped to identify and effectively support needs.⁵⁵” We agree that late intervention has a huge impact on the outcomes and experiences of autistic young people. Therefore, any training should provide school staff with the tools to enable early identification across all phases of school life.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Training cannot be a one-off. As understanding and best practice continues to evolve, so must teaching practices. CPD is needed to ensure that all staff are equipped with the most effective tools to support and understand autistic pupils to fulfil their potential.

The SEND Code of Practice 2015 currently states that when it comes to improving practice and staff training, *“Early years providers, schools and colleges are responsible for deciding what external support to seek and for setting their own priorities for the continuous professional development of their staff.⁵⁶”*

As discussed above, the current training provision and requirements are significantly missing the mark and autistic pupils are suffering as a result. Each autistic child or young person is different, so supporting them in education settings requires a deeper understanding of autism that can only be obtained through ongoing CPD.

There is a shortage of frontline staff to work in special schools and settings that support autistic young people with additional needs. Good CPD would allow teachers a clearer route to specialise in autism, filling these vacancies that threaten our ability to staff the additional special school places government funding has created to meet demand. Without sufficient and qualified staff across education settings in both mainstream and specialist provision, this puts increasing pressure on the quality of provision and on key roles such as SENCOs.

We recommend that a SEND workforce strategy should include mandatory CPD for all staff in education settings, providing training and development at every stage of their career, giving them the confidence and expertise to effectively identify and support needs.

⁵³ Department for Education. [ITT Core Content Framework](#). Published 2016.

⁵⁴ Department for Education. [ITT Core Content Framework](#). Published 2019.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care. [Special educational needs and disability code of practice:0 to 25 years](#). Published 2015

Vehicles for delivering CPD already exist, such as the Autism Education Trust, the leading CPD-accredited professional development programme in the UK. Training is created in partnership with autistic people, parents and education professionals and is supported by the DfE.

Non-teaching staff in schools

It is not just teachers who have an impact on the experiences of children and young people whilst they are in school. Many of those we surveyed emphasised in their response that autism awareness training should be required for all adults working in a school:

“Every member of staff that comes into contact with children should have at least a basic understanding and basic training about SEN children.” (Parent)

The Autism Education Trust, of which we are founding members, also provides whole school autism training to ensure autistic children are supported in all parts of school life.

Recommendation:

- **As part of a long-term SEND workforce strategy, government should reinstate understanding of autism as part of initial teacher training and ensure knowledge and skills relating to autism and SEND are embedded in ongoing continued professional development, including for non-teaching staff.**

5.2 Health and care workforce

A lack of autism understanding in schools is just one of the workforce challenges that lead to poor outcomes for autistic children. We consistently hear of unacceptable wait times for assessment of SEND, for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) support and for speech and language therapy, to name just a few, due to a lack of staff. We welcome the green paper proposal to work with the Department of Health to review health workforce needs in relation to SEND. But we would like to see a more strategic approach to developing a sufficient and capable SEND workforce across education, health and care.

Health

In CAMHS, the lack of mental health professionals is having a serious impact on wait times and access to appropriate support. As detailed in chapter three above, autistic young people with mental health needs tell us of long waits for support, even in crisis situations.

There is a chronic shortage of occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. 86% of our respondents wanted access to support such as speech and language therapies included in any new national standards. We support the joint letter from over 100 organisations, led by the RCSLT, which calls for urgent action to address the shortfall in the specialist workforce for children with SEND.

Social care

Families of autistic children who also have a learning disability, sometimes alongside complex health needs, tell us they simply cannot get the social care support they desperately need. From short breaks or respite care, to support in the home for children who do not sleep or need round-the-clock care, the help just is not there.

“Staff at local authority and social workers are unknowledgeable in complex needs and there are not enough respite services.” (Parent)

The lack of access to social workers creates delays in urgent support for very vulnerable autistic young people, which is exacerbated by a lack of autism knowledge among social workers. Furthermore, high turnover in areas such as family support services and social care support has resulted in a lack of access to care support being one of the most common issues for the over 300 children across our education settings.

“Our social worker only contacts us once a year!”
(Parent)

“Training in understanding autism should not just be focussed on education staff but also health and social care. There is very little understanding in these areas and yet they are involved in aspects of my son’s life.” (Parent)

The joined-up education, health and care system, that ran from 0-25, was supposed to fix this. But this has not happened because we do not have enough people in the essential jobs required to deliver it. This review of the SEND system is a real opportunity to get the right workforce in place across the education, health and care system.

We recommend the government publishes a comprehensive long-term workforce strategy to ensure there is a sufficient, well-trained and valued workforce across education, health and care, from 0-25. This strategy needs to be backed by appropriate funding and include clear targets and dates for implementation.

Recommendation:

- Government publishes a long-term SEND workforce strategy to address chronic shortfalls in skilled staff across education, health and care, from 0-25, backed by funding and clear implementation dates.

5.3 The wider workforce

Parents in our focus groups and those who responded to our surveys pointed to other areas they felt were chronically under-staffed. Despite the potential for conflict with managers in local authorities, several parents recognised that they were overwhelmed and had no time to actually deliver on what was agreed at meetings with young people and families. This lack of capacity should be factored into a SEND workforce strategy.

“I think one of the main barriers is capacity. Managers in [local authorities] are overwhelmed. Is there anything in the review looking at capacity? SEN Coordinators or case workers, for example, who parents deal with day-to-day, could they have more capacity so they actually have time to action things on their young people’s cases?” (Parent)

The workforce strategy would also need to include professionals such as careers advisors, where, as we discuss above, a lack of expertise in autism can severely limit the potential of autistic young people to thrive in their next steps following school.

5.4 Working together

The complexity of SEND often means professionals need to work together around a child and family to support them best, sharing information and plans for support. This takes time. In a stretched system, it is one of the things that often gets sacrificed.

Members of our Ambitious Youth Network said:

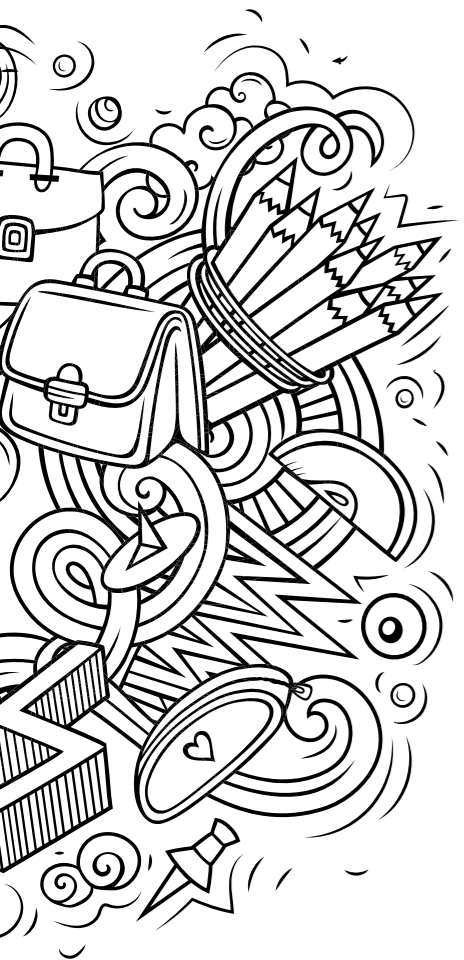
“EHC plans are too much education. My social care plan is too separate. My college didn’t even think I had a social care plan.”

“My family always say that if there’s a gap, I will find it, I will fall in it. Those gaps between social care and health care, and school and alternative provision... The GP just shrugs their shoulders. I can’t keep track of it all, it’s just impossible.”

To ensure the greatest efficiency of resources, where different services work together rather than duplicate or push against each other, time must be factored in to facilitate joint working. The RISE research led by the Council for Disabled Children into what works in effective systems of delivering quality SEND support, is eagerly awaited and should be factored into strategic plans for workforce development.

Recommendation:

- Government publishes a long-term SEND workforce strategy, across education, health and care, from 0-25, backed by funding and clear implementation dates.



6. Is SEND accountability a write off?

Key statistics:

- Two thirds of parents (67%) thought mandatory mediation would not help children get the support they needed.
- 85% of parents wanted clear targets and accountability for diagnosis and support waiting times

6.1 Who is accountable?

Failings across the SEND system mean that children and young people are being denied support they are entitled to. Changing this requires a serious rethink of education, health and social care policy in the ways we have already outlined above: through early intervention, a workforce strategy, making schools more inclusive and ensuring this is all underpinned by sufficient funding.

However, while it's clear that autistic children and young people often denied their right to support, it's less clear how families are supposed to hold local authorities, schools and other services to account. They are often left with few options but to take local authorities to court via the SEND Tribunal. But this process is highly stressful, expensive and can further delay the support children receive at school.

While the government acknowledges that accountability in the SEND system is an issue, we do not see how their proposed solutions, such as 'Inclusion Dashboards,' resolve the fact that services routinely fail autistic children and young people without any real consequences.

Some of the SEND green paper proposals actually weaken existing accountability mechanisms, such as changing the criteria for appeal at tribunal and introducing mandatory mediation, which would only create more delays and hoops for parents to jump through.

6.2 National standards: Accountability vs standardisation

We need a new way to address many of the problems in the SEND system described by the Government: inconsistent practice, late intervention and ultimately poor outcomes for children and young people. We know that schools must become more inclusive environments, but how do we support them to get there?

The Government has proposed that the way to clarify what should be ordinarily available for children with SEND is through a new set of national standards. As currently formulated, we fear that introducing these standards would involve a wholesale change to the legal framework for SEND. Changing the existing laws would be costly, unnecessary and frightening for families whose rights would be put under threat. We seek assurance that national standards will not replace the current protections in the Children and Families Act.

However, the idea of national standards is not necessarily a bad one if they are used to set out clear and consistent expectations for schools, college and services about what should be ordinarily available, without undermining existing rights. We propose this could be achieved through adapting the proposal into plans for National Inclusion Standards.

National Inclusion Standards would clarify what inclusive policies look like, highlight that blanket approaches are incompatible with the Equality Act and could point to good practice examples. This would improve consistency, foster more inclusive practices in mainstream settings and help needs to be identified promptly so appropriate support can be put in place.

National Inclusion Standards should also include specific guidance for supporting children and young people with SEND who are struggling with attendance. For example, if attendance becomes an issue, the standards should require any young person and their family to be offered a conversation with a SENCO. They could also set out training and staffing expectations in relation to SEND, which we discuss in chapter five.

In our survey, we asked parents what they would like to see included in the new national standards (if they were to be introduced), what is needed for these standards to be successful and how services should be held to account.

-
- **77% wanted inclusivity to be written into the national standards.**
 - **Families said their biggest priority was training to understand autism for school staff with 94% saying this should be in the national standards.**
 - **86% wanted access to therapies such as speech and language therapies.**
 - **85% wanted clear targets and accountability for diagnosis and support waiting times.**
 - **79% wanted to be involved in co-producing the national standards.**
-

“The most important thing needs to be including the autistic individual in the standards and ensuring that their needs are addressed - no two people are the same, and no two autistic people are going to have identical needs. Ensure they are central!” (Parent)

Below is an outline of our proposal, with a suggested framework for what National Inclusion Standards could look like:

- 1. Clear national expectation that every school is a SEND school, pointing to:**
 - Legal duties in the Equality Act and Children and Families Act 2014,
 - Ofsted inspection requirements,
 - Education funding being dependent on delivery of quality SEND support.
- 2. Principles of inclusive learning:**
 - A clear, consistent definition of what is meant by inclusive learning,
 - The fundamental importance of children, young people and families being partners in designing SEND support,
 - Reference to leadership, culture, workforce, training, environment, equipment and resources,
 - Inclusive school policies: behaviour, uniform, admissions, exclusion (highlighting unlawful examples and giving positive examples).

- Reference to partnerships with specialist providers to assess and meet specific needs and build capacity and ways to fund this
- Links to where examples of the above can be found, such as the SEND Gateway

3. Accountability for the education of children with SEND

Highlight high rates of absenteeism and exclusion among children with SEND and state that it's a government priority to reduce them, therefore:

- Ofsted Education and Local Area inspection frameworks will have a renewed focus on children with SEND out of education. Inspectors will look for evidence of how admission, attendance and achievement is supported for children with SEND, how exclusions are avoided, and how children's needs are assessed to identify SEND.
- Require that schools offer children with high absence rates or at risk of exclusion a supportive assessment to uncover any unmet needs.
- Independent Review Panels are given the power to overturn an exclusion based on the advice of the SEN expert.

National Inclusion Standards would set a clear, high-level expectation that including children with SEND is the job of every single school. It would set out ways of working that have been successfully used to include autistic young people in the full life of schools, colleges and their communities and highlight the wider benefits this brings. This would support schools and improve families' confidence in the SEND system, providing greater clarity about what they should expect services to deliver for their children.

Recommendation:

- **Government adapts plans for national standards into plans for National Inclusion Standards, which set clear, high expectations for services about what SEND provision should be ordinarily available in each area and highlight the Equality Act duties.**

6.3 Mediation and the SEND Tribunal

Mandatory mediation should not be introduced as it will create further delays for autistic pupils getting support in a process which is already too long and costly for both families and the taxpayer.

We successfully fought against the proposal to introduce mandatory mediation during the 2014 reforms on the grounds that it delays families getting support. We continue to hold this view. The focus should instead be on improving processes, the quality of support and ensuring that families are listened to and their child's needs are met. Improving the quality of provision and making mainstream schools more inclusive would reduce the need for families to appeal to the SEND Tribunal – a decision that parents and carers do not take lightly due to the time, cost and emotional toll involved. It is also one that cannot be made by families who lack knowledge of the system and the resources to engage with it.

“I gave my job up as a SEND TA and Emotional Support Literacy Assistant as I had a breakdown whilst supporting our son whilst waiting 54 weeks for EHCP. He was suicidal for months. We took out a loan to get a solicitor. We paid £13,000.” (Parent)

In 2021, 8,579 parents had to appeal decisions made regarding their EHC plans. Nearly half of these (4,041) related to decisions made about autistic children⁵⁷. Tribunals are expensive – not just for parents but also for the taxpayer. Most tribunal cases involving autistic children are won by parents or conceded by local authorities. The green paper itself references the fact that of the cases upheld in 2020/21, 96% were at least partly in favour of the parent or carer⁵⁸.

“Unless mediation can be a very quick process, all that will happen is there will be further delay for the parent to access what the child needs. Furthermore, mediators aren't lawyers. The process of mediation is for the parties to meet in the middle. The effect of this is that parents may give up rights to which they are entitled to through the mediation process.” (Parent)

⁵⁷ Department for Education, [Education Health and Care Plans](#) Published May 2022

⁵⁸ Ministry of Justice, [Tribunal Statistics Quarterly, July to September 2021](#). Published December 2022

We know that some parents choose mediation. In 2021, 5,100 mediation cases were held in relation to EHC plans⁵⁹. Clearly, there is still a role for mediation and we are not suggesting that it should be removed entirely as an option. However, the fact that some parents choose mediation does not mean that it should become mandatory.

Despite the challenges, the tribunal remains an important mechanism of legal redress for parents to challenge local authority decisions. Of the parents and carers who responded to our SEND review survey, 20% had been through the tribunal process. Most written responses indicated that without the tribunal, their child's outcomes would have been poor.

We share concerns by many in the sector that the proposed new national standards would reduce the rights of families to challenge local authority decisions. The green paper states that: *“Appeals to the tribunal should only need to be made in cases where parents feel that their child's needs or proposed provision arrangements are not in line with the new national SEND standards, and mediation has not resolved the dispute. Tribunal decisions would be made in line with the new statutory national SEND and alternative provision standards.”*

The suggestion that appeals to tribunal should only be made “where parents feel they are not in line with the national standards” would be a fundamental change to how the law currently operates. Rather than being accountable to the rights enshrined in the Children and Families Act 2014, parents would only be able to challenge decisions based on whether they are in line with the new standards. As previously stated, it is widely accepted by those in the sector that the existing legal framework is the right one and that any attempt to replace it could represent a serious weakening of families' rights. It is especially concerning that decisions about individuals would be made based on new standards that we currently know extremely little about.

The government's goal of reducing the number of Tribunal appeals to only “the most challenging” cases should only be achieved by making sure the existing law is complied with and that children and young people with SEND have access to a quality education. It should not be achieved by making it harder to enforce children's rights to provision through mandatory mediation or changing the criteria for appeal based on standards. We should be looking for ways to ensure the law is complied with in the first place through a more robust accountability system.

Recommendation:

- **Mandatory mediation should not be introduced as it will delay autistic pupils getting support in a process which is already too long and costly for both families and the taxpayer.**



⁵⁹ Department for Education, [Education Health and Care Plans](#) Published May 2022

6.4 Ofsted

Autistic children and young people are being let down by a system which fails to provide them with what they are entitled to and then fails to hold services to account when things go wrong.

We know that Ofsted has a meaningful impact on schools' and colleges' behaviour and priorities. As the only universal accountability system in education, it must work better for children with SEND. Other layers of accountability must also result in action. Tribunal rulings against local authorities, local area SEND inspections and Ombudsman decisions must have consequences that improve practice rather than just highlight failings.

Despite the current regulations, many parents and families who responded to our survey indicated they and their child had been placed in a situation that was unlawful. This explains why accountability is felt by so many as key to improving the SEND system.

“Without accountability, it won’t be followed, and nothing will change.” (Parent)

Ofsted is the only existing universal accountability system in education. If the government truly wants to fulfil its ambition of ensuring that far more children and young people can *“access the support they need in their local mainstream setting, without the need for an EHCP or specialist provision,”* then all schools need to see themselves as quality providers of SEND support. Until this happens, autistic children and young people with SEND will be disadvantaged before they even step through the gates for their first open day visit.

To make sure this happens, we would like to see the quality of SEND support become a limiting Ofsted judgement. This means that a setting would not be able to get a good or outstanding Ofsted judgement unless its SEND support is also good or outstanding. If the government is serious about all schools being good SEND schools, we need to make them properly accountable for their quality of SEND support.

Autistic young people have expressed support for the quality of SEND provision being monitored more closely when schools are inspected.

A member of our Ambitious Youth Network said:

“I think all schools should have a good understanding of autism and how to support autistic children and I believe this is something that should be monitored when schools are inspected.”

Recommendation:

- **Ofsted further prioritises SEND in the education inspection framework, including making the quality of SEND support a limiting judgement.**

Families also want SEND performance data shared with them; 83% thought this was a priority for holding schools to account. We therefore support the proposal to collect and share better data and create an inclusion dashboard to monitor local performance. However, it is important that these dashboards are accessible to families, show the data that families and young people with SEND want and need to see and that the performance measures are chosen in collaboration with the autistic community.

Ultimately, we need robust, clear and effective mechanisms for families to hold services to account. While it’s important that the existing route of the SEND Tribunal is upheld, without changing the criteria or introducing mandatory mediation, the government must explore other ways to strengthen accountability. Creating inclusion dashboards is welcome, but it won’t fix the problems in the system. The quality of SEND support must become a greater priority for Ofsted by making it a limiting judgement. That way, all schools can be properly assessed for the quality of provision they provide for autistic pupils, rather than just relying on local authority level inspections.

Recommendation:

- **Government adapts plans for national standards into plans for National Inclusion Standards, which set clear, high expectations for services about what SEND provision should be ordinarily available in each area and highlight the Equality Act duties.**
- **Mandatory mediation should not be introduced as it will delay autistic pupils getting support in a process which is already too long and costly for both families and the taxpayer.**

7. Right support, right place, right time: Mainstream, special and the power of partnerships

Key statistics:

- **75% of parents with a child in special school felt their child was in the right place.**
- **73% of parents of children in mainstream school were not confident of teachers' understanding of their child's needs. In alternative provision only 40% of parents were confident. By contrast, 78% of parents of children in special schools were confident that staff understood their child's needs.**
- **Only 35% of young people attending mainstream schools felt listened to compared with 75% attending special schools.**

Summary

We want autistic children and young people to have better access to specialist support if they need it, in whatever school they attend. The lack of vision in the SEND review for building stronger and more flexible links between specialist and mainstream providers is a missed opportunity. Achieving the aim of “right support, right place, right time” will rely on more creative partnership approaches between mainstream and specialist providers and the funding models to deliver that. We propose that, done right, this could help improve financial sustainability by meeting children's needs earlier, closer to home and without disruptive transitions.

7.1 Why is demand for special school places rising?

When asked about finding the right school for their child, families responding to our survey revealed a sense of despair, struggle and in some cases trauma. This emotional experience is difficult to quantify, but fewer than five out of hundreds of parents responding on this topic reported a satisfactory experience of finding a school. Numerous responses describe the process as “adversarial”. Families talk of a system that is bureaucratic and beset with delays. There is a sense from parents that the obstructions are deliberate, and many believe that local authorities would rather pay to go to court than pay for a suitable school placement.

“Alleged lack of funding. He got there in the end but only after a vast sum of money was wasted on bureaucracy. There is always money for that, money that could be used in the frontline.” (Parent)

The right support in the right place?

In our survey of 1,867 families, 65% of parents of a child in mainstream education said they were not happy with their education. 60% of those in alternative provision felt that their child was not in the right school. Two thirds of those who were home educated were not happy with the situation. By contrast, three quarters of parents with a child in special school felt their child was in the right place.

We do not interpret these results as evidence that more autistic children need a special school place. Rather, what we draw from them and the comments from families alongside them, is that something is happening in special schools that is working, which is not currently happening enough in other settings. Some of those things might not be easily transferable, such as highly specialist equipment or environments, but some of them will be, such as understanding of children's needs, reasonable adjustments to meet them and positive attitudes to autism and SEND.

The government has taken positive steps to share ‘what works’ in SEND, not least through the Autism Education Trust, Whole School SEND and the RISE project led by the Council for Disabled Children. We recognise the mainstream schools and colleges that work hard to deliver inclusive provision, but much more needs to be done. Increasing creative collaboration between

mainstream and specialist providers could turbo-charge the sharing of knowledge and specialist support, in ways that will get the right support to young people with SEND, whatever 'place' they are in.

We call on government to set out a vision for this collaboration and explore models to fund it.

A member of our Ambitious Youth Network said:

"I feel it is very important that we do not do what is most convenient, cost effective or fashionable but consider what environment each individual would thrive in, be it mainstream or special. It is so important there are enough places for children in specialist schools and that they are considered as a viable option for autistic children and young people. They should not be considered as last resorts or only for people with behavioural issues – as they too often are."

The role of Alternative Provision (AP)

A fifth of families completing our survey had experience of AP. They had mixed experiences.

"The staff went over and beyond to make sure we were okay! They would arrange day trips out for us and if we were particularly struggling one day they would talk to us to see if there was anything they could do to help! I am thankful that place exists as it helped me get back on my feet after being out of school for a year and a bit."
(Autistic young person)

"The PRU was for older disruptive pupils. My son was a distressed autistic 5-year-old." (Parent)

"My son's mainstream school have set up a small alternative provision unit for him and two other pupils who are struggling with mainstream. This has reduced his exclusions and he is now able to access the curriculum with a high level of support." (Parent)

Proposals in the green paper to "make alternative provision an integral part of the SEND system" could be a step in the right direction towards greater collaboration. But any shift in the role of AP towards early intervention must not reduce the need for all schools to provide early intervention. Autistic young people must be able to get support, including around behaviour management, in their school and not be moved in and out of AP for this. The right for children to get support in their own school must not be compromised by this shifting role for AP. Wherever possible, support should be brought to the child early and proactively, rather than the child needing to be moved.

Ofsted research found a link between increasing numbers of primary school children attending AP and long waits for specialist support or special school places. Chief inspector Amanda Spielman commented, "*Limited access to external services, and lengthy waiting times for a special school place, mean some vulnerable children languish for years in APs that cannot provide the specialist support they need. And the consequences for these children may last well into their adult lives*⁶⁰."

Ofsted recommends that we look at the specific role of AP within an integrated SEND system. But why stop at AP? What about a holistic system that creates links between all types of education provision in an area? A system where AP, special schools and specialist colleges have ways to work collaboratively with mainstream partners to fill gaps in training, specialist advice, assessments and interventions. There are examples where this already works to some extent, including our own Ambitious College, run in partnership with a general further education college. But these partnerships are few and far between. They exist despite the system, not because of it. Most funding is place-based which doesn't lend itself easily to collaborative models.

⁶⁰ Schools Week, Spielman: [Special school crisis leaves primary pupils 'languishing' in AP](#), 10 November 2022.

7.2 Sharing expertise between mainstream and special schools and colleges

The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) recently published a report on joint working between mainstream and specialist colleges, which found several benefits for learners⁶¹.

These included:

- Extending or enriching learning opportunities for young people,
- Enabling learners to progress further or more fully reach their potential,
- Upskilling the current and future workforce to better meet learner need and
- Supporting greater inclusion.

One of the examples in this report is about learners from our own Ambitious College:

“West Thames College is drawing on the ‘expertise by experience’ of learners from its co-located partner, Ambitious College. Ambitious learners have designed a training module to help teachers in the General further education (GFE) to develop effective practice when working with autistic learners on mainstream courses. West Thames College was motivated to seek out their support when it became apparent through learner feedback that their current approach could be improved. The module includes advice on delivery, environment and the setting of appropriate tasks. It is delivered by the learners, giving them an excellent opportunity to practise their communication skills, and should result in a more inclusive learning experience for learners in the GFE.”

Our positive experience of running Ambitious College alongside a mainstream partner has led to us developing more services in partnership with mainstream colleagues. The Rise School is co-located with a mainstream college, and our new free school, Spring School, opening soon in Kingston will work closely with local mainstream partners.

Responses to our survey suggest that sharing training across schools could be particularly beneficial. 73% of parents of children in mainstream school were not confident of teachers’ understanding of their child’s needs. In alternative provision only 40% of parents were confident. By contrast, 78% of parents of children in special schools were confident that staff understood their child’s needs. By developing partnerships between mainstream and special schools, we can share training to build teachers’ expertise in SEND. This goes both ways. Mainstream schools are likely to have curriculum depth and breadth and inclusion opportunities that will be hugely beneficial for partner special schools and their learners.

We support the conclusions of the ETF report that some partnership working can be delivered in current systems, but that systemic change is needed to facilitate it fully. The report focuses on further education (FE) and we would be keen to see similar research into school-age services – particularly into funding models that enable better join up between mainstream and special schools. At the moment, the way funding flows assumes a placement model: a child is in one type of school (or unit) and gets their support there. Exploration of funding models that better allow specialist support from another setting to be brought in to meet a child’s needs would be a step forward.

This not only helps meet children’s individual needs sooner and with less disruption, but also helps build capacity and share learning between staff. In our view, this is a game-changer in terms of the financial sustainability of the SEND system. The aim is to further spread and grow specialist SEND knowledge across mainstream schools and colleges via partnerships, rather than keep specialist knowledge behind the doors of special schools where only some children will access it. This approach maintains a strong role for mainstream, AP and specialist settings, but gives children much more chance of having access to expertise of their SEND, whatever type of school or college they attend.

Recommendation:

- **National Inclusion Standards set a clear vision for increased collaboration between mainstream and specialist education providers.**
- **Funding models to support these partnerships are explored and consulted upon.**

⁶¹ Education Endowment Foundation. [Putting learners with SEND at the centre of FE provision: A partnership approach](#). Published 2022

8. What is most important to autistic young people and their families?

Autistic young people tell us they just want to be able to go to school, learn while they are there, not get excluded, feel okay and find employment once they leave education. It doesn't seem like a lot to ask, does it? While our ambitions go much further, young people just want their basic rights – something they are routinely being denied.

8.1 Being heard, understood, and engaged

Under the Children and Families Act, local authorities are legally required to have regard for the views, feelings and wishes of young people and families and for them to participate as fully as possible in decisions about their support. However, families and young people tell us they don't feel like they have a real say in the support they receive.

“Co-production and accessibility to resources is very important. Currently young people are fixed into what boroughs have available rather than creating services that meet needs.” (Parent)

Of the young people who responded to our survey, 42% felt they were not listened to when decisions were being made about the support they receive in education. This problem seems to be particularly pronounced among those in mainstream schools: 35% attending mainstream schools felt listened to, compared with 83% in alternative provision and 75% in special schools.

“For schools to accept that students are struggling and to listen and get help rather than dismiss it as teenage problems.” (Autistic young person)

Parents also told us they want to be listened to and acknowledged and for their child to have their needs met promptly. Many parents say they feel ignored, not believed, or put through a system that is designed to put them off.

“At first I asked for my son to be allocated a special school for education, but they allocated mainstream. I refused this as I knew my son wouldn't have his needs met in mainstream, and eventually got a place in a special school. The people who do the EHC plan need to listen to the parents, they know their child better than anyone.” (Parent)

8.2 Having their basic rights protected

For many autistic young people, the basic right to go to school and feel supported while they're there is a write-off. Many report having to fail or spend years not learning before they get the right support, which limits their achievement and has serious implications for their mental health.

“I was very unsupported at school to the point where I was forced to leave because of bad mental and physical health.” (Autistic young person)

“Support for SEN is hidden. I went through school with no support because we didn't know it was there. Then even when we did know, it was impossible to get it. It was only when I went to a hospital school that I got any help. I want it to be obvious where you can get help.” (Autistic young person)

Families also feel exhausted by the constant battles they face to keep their children in education and get the support they are entitled to. Parents are clear that any reforms to the SEND system should be founded on the principle of a child's right to an education by ensuring existing laws are enforced, rather than by creating new ones.

“An absolute expectation that all SEN children's rights to an education are followed regardless of schools' funding or staffing issues. What good is it to make new laws when schools are breaking current educational laws about SEN children's right to full time education.” (Parent)

8.3 Being able to be themselves

Many autistic young people told us that school feels like a hostile and overwhelming place, where they feel lonely and unsupported. A lack of understanding of autism among staff and their peers leads to bullying, anxiety and poor attainment, making it very difficult for them to attend school and achieve their potential.

Autistic young people told us:

“I felt like an alien (out of place/different but unsure why/how).”

“Something was wrong, but it wasn’t identified and I was just alone.”

“I need a friend.”

“(I felt) anxious. I felt pressured to go into my school when I couldn’t even stand going outside. I felt like those around me were disappointed in me.”

Creating more inclusive school cultures, identifying needs early and providing the right support would help autistic young people to feel like they can be themselves at school. As well as improving the education system, early diagnosis and post-diagnostic support can transform young people’s lives, improving their self-confidence and helping them to form a positive view their identity.

Recommendations:

- **The views of autistic young people and their families should be heard and acted upon in the development of education and wider policy.**
- **Co-production should be embedded in the national inclusion standards, so that autistic young people and their families have their views heard as policies and support are developed at school and local authority level.**

Conclusion and recommendations

Autistic young people and their families just want the basic things we take for granted: to go to school, to reach their potential and to enjoy a life lived as independently as possible.

But they feel written off by an education system that works against them. Narrow attainment targets, misdirected attendance policy and behaviour and exclusion approaches that disproportionately disadvantage autistic young people all serve to lock too many out of school, work and society.

The government’s SEND review has the opportunity and intention to change that. But families are scared that, instead, it threatens the rights they depend on to get support and school places for their autistic children. During a cost-of-living crisis and public spending cuts these families need support and reassurance more than ever.

We know the government wants to listen to children and young people with SEND and their families. We hope that, having done so, they will shift the direction of the SEND review to reflect their feedback and our recommendations.

Key recommendations

We stand with autistic young people and their families in calling on government to:

- Uphold current laws that help children with SEND get the assessments, support and school place they need and protect their funding, to avoid making things worse and causing active harm to children and families.
- Make all education policy work for SEND pupils so they can achieve their potential, with a clear expectation that every school is a SEND school, every teacher is a SEND teacher and every policy is a SEND policy.
- Publish a plan to develop a valued, skilled, sufficient SEND workforce, backed by resources, with clear timescales.
- Ask Ofsted to make the quality of SEND support a greater priority in inspections.

- Gather and share evidence on how mainstream education and special schools and colleges can work together to get children the right support, at the right time, in the right place.

Join our campaign action

There is a window of opportunity to change things.

Join our campaign action to stand with autistic children and young people and call for change.

Detailed recommendations

Protecting rights and funding

- Government drops plans for ‘tailored lists’.
- Government commits to maintaining the Children and Families Act 2014 Part 3 protections so children can, for example, have their needs assessed and met, and parents can request a school place based on their own judgement.
- Plans for national banding should be replaced with funding reforms that prioritise transparency, sufficiency and responsiveness.
- The promised real terms increase in the high needs budget is restated and delivered.

Schools

- Review national attainment measures to ensure they incentivise progress for all children, do not exclude the achievements of children with SEND and consider use of destination measures as part of this.
- National inclusion standards should set out how behaviour policies can be made inclusive, with an emphasis on engaging with each individual pupil to understand their difficulties and what kind of support they need.
- Make school attendance policies more inclusive by providing the right support to pupils with SEND. Encourage the adoption of a whole school approach to promoting positive mental wellbeing so all pupils feel able to attend and fully participate in all aspects of school life.
- Rather than penalising absence, attendance guidance should emphasise the importance of working with persistent absentees to identify, understand and address the underlying causes of their poor attendance.

- Ensure national inclusion standards reinforce the need for an inclusive culture, SEND training for school leaders and whole school approaches to SEND.

Mental health and wellbeing

- Reduce waiting times for CAMHS by improving the sufficiency and capability of staff and services. This should form a key part of the review of health staff needed to support the SEND population, as proposed in the SEND review.
- Increase autism expertise in mental health services so that professionals have a better understanding of autism, building on the success of the Oliver McGowan mandatory training pilot.
- NHS England to ensure local areas offer alternatives to talking therapy and CBT that might be more appropriate for some autistic children and young people, such as art therapies and social prescribing.
- NHS England to fund and commission pre and post-diagnosis support services that improve wellbeing for autistic young people, based on learning from our model.
- Stop autistic children and young people losing access to mental health support in the transition to adult services by extending the upper age limit for CAMHS to 25, establishing a joined-up 0-25 system across education, health and social care.
- The Department for Health and Social Care should work with the DfE to ensure that new legislation, such as the Schools Bill and other proposals, such as the SEND review, are joined up to ensure schools, colleges, health and social care services are meeting the mental health needs of autistic young people.
- Consider expanding early intervention autism-inclusive mental health support, such as funding and expanding early support hubs, mental health first aid training in schools, helplines for advice and support groups.

Employability and transition to adulthood

- EHC plans to evolve to become Employment, Health and Care plans (or employment and health support plans), once a young person is ready to make the transition from education to employment.
- Access to Work Adjustment Passports to be embedded in an updated SEND Code of Practice and in the new National Inclusion Standards.

- Schools, colleges and universities should provide mandatory tailored careers guidance to disabled young people, including the provision of information about schemes such as Access to Work, Disability Confident, supported internships and other employment schemes.
- All new employment and training programmes from the DfE and the DWP should have an Equality Impact Assessment prior to launch, outlining how they will be inclusive and accessible to young people with SEND.
- Implement the Maynard Review recommendations to improve access to apprenticeships for people with a learning disability.

Workforce

- As part of a long-term SEND workforce strategy, government should reinstate understanding of autism as part of initial teacher training and ensure knowledge and skills relating to autism and SEND are embedded in ongoing continued professional development, including for non-teaching staff.
- Government publishes a long-term SEND workforce strategy to address chronic shortfalls in skilled staff across education, health and care, from 0-25, backed by funding and clear implementation dates.

Accountability

- Government adapts plans for national standards into plans for National Inclusion Standards, which set clear, high expectations for services about what SEND provision should be ordinarily available in each area and highlight the Equality Act duties.
- Mandatory mediation should not be introduced as it will delay autistic pupils getting support in a process which is already too long and costly for both families and the taxpayer.
- Ofsted further prioritises SEND in the education inspection framework, including making the quality of SEND support a limiting judgement.

Listening to autistic young people and their families

- The views of autistic young people and their families should be heard and acted upon in the development of education and wider policy.
- Co-production should be embedded in the national inclusion standards, so that autistic young people and their families have their views heard, as policies and support are developed at school and local authority level.

Partnerships between mainstream education and special schools and colleges

- National Inclusion Standards set a clear vision for increased collaboration between mainstream and specialist education providers.
- Funding models to support these partnerships are explored and consulted upon.



We are Ambitious about Autism

Ambitious about Autism is the national charity standing with autistic children and young people.

We believe every autistic child and young person has the right to be themselves and realise their ambitions.

We started as one school and have become a movement for change. We champion rights, campaign for change and create opportunities.

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