

Creating the conditions for inclusion

Recommendations in response to the schools white paper and SEND reforms



Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	8
Scope	10
Participating organisations	10
Contributors	11
Recommendation 1. Place inclusion at the heart of young people’s school experience by broadening ‘what counts’ in accountability to improve outcomes for the ‘forgotten third’	12
The problem	12
Why it matters	13
What the government should do	13
1.1 Build new inclusion measures and monitoring frameworks using existing datasets, adding missing data, and embedding pupil voice	14
1.2. Build clarity around the respective roles of MATs and local authorities	16
What changes if we get this right	17
Recommendation 2. Build inclusive practice into every school	18
The problem	18
Why it matters	18
What the government should do	19
2.1. Develop shared principles and definitions for inclusion, belonging and early identification alongside development of an Inclusive Practice Framework	19
2.2 Create the necessary infrastructure to support schools implement inclusive practices	22
What changes if we get this right	24
Recommendation 3. Value and integrate vocational pathways to reduce NEETs and broaden what success looks like for every young person	25
The problem	25
Why it matters	25
What the government should do	27
3.1. Reform performance to recognise technical and vocational outcomes	27
3.2. Make vocational pathways visible and easier to access for pupils	28
3.3 Align local systems around transition and NEET reduction	29
What changes if we get this right	31
Conclusion	32

Executive Summary

This paper details three distinct recommendations drafted by a coalition of organisations in response to the recent white paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, and the accompanying SEND reform proposals.

We share the government's ambition to create an education system that benefits all children and young people. For that ambition to be realised, the reforms need to create the conditions in which inclusive practice can be recognised, supported and sustained, including by aligning accountability arrangements with the ambition for a more inclusive system. This is not only essential to meet the aspirations set out in the schools white paper, but to ensure that all children can genuinely thrive within education, particularly the 'forgotten third': the significant group of children and young people, including those with social, emotional and mental health needs, whose strengths, progress and potential are not fully recognised by the current system, leading to poor mental health, low attainment and exclusion. We recognise that significant good practice already exists across the sector, and these recommendations detail how to change the underlying conditions so that practice can be recognised, shared, and scaled. This will move the system away from relying on highly motivated professionals working hard to identify and implement good practice to create inclusion.

Recommendation 1. Place inclusion at the heart of young people's school experience by broadening 'what counts' in accountability to improve outcomes for the 'forgotten third'

To embed inclusion across the system, it is important to reverse the perverse incentives that fail to recognise schools serving more complex cohorts of children and young people, and that do not create the accountability structures needed to surface harmful practices such as off-rolling. We have two sub-recommendations.

1.1 Build new inclusion measures and monitoring frameworks using existing datasets, adding missing data, and embedding pupil voice

We recommend creating an Inclusion and Participation Scorecard. The scorecard would combine three categories of data: context and composition, including levels of identified SEND, disadvantage levels and prior attainment; formal inclusion outcomes, including attendance, exclusions and managed moves; and additional school-level data, such as use of alternative provision and pupil wellbeing indicators. Rather than another accountability measure, this is intended as a development tool: a mirror for schools and other stakeholders to benchmark their inclusion indicators and identify areas for enquiry and improvement.

We also recommend adding new items to pupil-level returns and the School Census, including all alternative provision placements, use of in-school support units and internal suspension rooms, and an "at risk" indicator to identify pupils who would benefit from early support. These additions would improve the visibility of children and young people who risk becoming 'invisible' in the system, including those spending significant time in internal alternative provision.

Underpinning all of this must be a strong pupil voice. We recommend utilising the Pupil Engagement Framework as the vehicle for this. For it to be effective, the Framework should include a consistent bank of comparable questions and be administered through registered providers to ensure fair and consistent application. We also think particular attention is needed to ensure it reaches the most marginalised pupils, such as those within alternative provision settings; we would encourage the development of alternative methodologies where standard surveys cannot reach.

1.2 Build clarity around the respective roles of MATs and local authorities

The schools white paper creates a tension between a trust-led system and a strengthened local authority role; whereby LAs are still accountable for inclusion, but, in some cases, MATs are choosing to have much less engagement with their LAs. To address this accountability imbalance, we recommend the introduction of Local Inclusion and Participation Agreements (LIPAs) as a statutory requirement for all MATs. LIPAs would establish shared delegation of accountability, escalation pathways, multi-agency coordination processes and data-sharing agreements between MATs and local authorities. Evidence of the effectiveness of these agreements, and of the relationship between MAT and LA, should form part of every MAT's Ofsted inspection.

Recommendation 2. Build inclusive practice into every school

To embed inclusion across the education system, it is important that all schools have access to a robust inclusion evidence base, and the support to implement inclusive practice effectively. We have two sub-recommendations.

2.1 Develop shared principles and definitions for inclusion, belonging and early identification alongside development of an Inclusive Practice Framework

Greater consistency is needed in how key terms are used across the schools white paper, SEND reforms, Ofsted framework, and school-level guidance. For example, we recommend that the definition of early identification is extended beyond early years and reception to recognise that needs can emerge at any stage of a child or young person's life. The proposed move away from SEMH as a formal category of need also makes it especially important that children and young people with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs remain visible in the system. Whatever terminology is adopted, these needs must continue to be recognised and supported. A clear distinction between universal inclusion for all pupils and targeted SEND support for those with identified additional needs should also be consistently applied.

Once the sector has collective understanding of key terms, we recommend that DfE introduces a statutory Inclusive Practice Framework for all schools. This Framework should contain best practice inclusion evidence. This would enable schools to develop an annual school inclusion plan, embedding evidence-based approaches such as relational practice, trauma-informed and nurture approaches. We also recommend the development of a national case study bank to be used alongside the Framework, connecting schools to existing good practice and enabling improvement across the system. Although statutory, the Framework should not operate as a narrow compliance tool; its purpose is to build capacity, consistency and confidence.

2.2 Create the necessary infrastructure to support schools to implement inclusive practices

To be successful, all requirements placed on schools must be underpinned by a corresponding infrastructure. We recommend the creation of a national register of accredited inclusion and SEMH CPD providers, strengthened expectations for school leadership on inclusion, protection of the Inclusive Mainstream Fund, and a formal review of teaching workload. Taken together, these will significantly improve the conditions for schools to implement inclusive practice successfully, rooted in established and evidenced approaches.

Recommendation 3. Value and integrate vocational pathways to reduce NEETs and broaden what success looks like for every young person

Too many children are disengaged from education and are not offered pathways that match their strengths and aspirations. Only through creating genuinely valued vocational pathways will we build an education system in which all children and young people can thrive. This will also support the wider aim of reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training. We have three sub-recommendations.

3.1 Reform performance to recognise technical and vocational outcomes

Performance frameworks should be reformed to treat vocational and technical routes as equally valid pathways as academic pathways. It is important to create equity between vocational and academic qualifications and to also recognise that vocational pathways do not need to be measured against academic benchmarks to have value. We recommend that Progress 8 should be evaluated to assess how this informs schools' decision making about the qualifications and routes they make available to young people. Participation, progression and sustained destinations should be recognised as valid measures of success alongside attainment. Functional skills qualifications should be explicitly recognised within performance measures, reducing the invisibility of young people who achieve them despite making real progress.

3.2 Make vocational pathways visible and easier to access for pupils

Vocational pathways must be visible and accessible. Schools should provide exposure to vocational learning, deliver impartial careers education that treats technical and vocational as equal options, and build partnerships with FE colleges, employers and independent training providers so that young people can know the full range of pathways.

3.3 Align local systems around transition and NEET reduction

We recommend the development of a consistent framework, co-produced by DfE with relevant stakeholders, to align accountabilities across schools, FE colleges, local authorities and employers with the shared goal of reducing the number of young people becoming NEET. This framework should address how FE admissions can be made more accessible, how alternative provision is measured on reintegration and destination outcomes, and how schools are supporting pupils for their futures. We also recommend the development of a skills passport: a portable, employer-readable record of the skills young people have developed throughout their education and work experience, aligned to existing qualification and apprenticeship frameworks rather than a parallel system.

We also welcome the opportunity presented by the SEND reform proposals to strengthen vocational post-16 pathways for young people with SEND and would welcome further clarity on how Individual Support Plans, the experts-at-hand model, and FE funding arrangements will support this group through critical transitions.

Taken together, these recommendations are designed to work as a system: reforming the incentives that shape school behaviour, building the practice and infrastructure that schools need, and ensuring that vocational routes are recognised as equally valid paths to success. Without these changes, children and young people with social, emotional and mental health needs, and the wider 'forgotten third', will continue to fall through the gaps of a system that is not sufficiently responsive to their needs. We welcome the direction of the schools white paper and would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department for Education to ensure these reforms translate into lasting, system-wide change.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* white paper and the accompanying SEND reform proposals. The organisations contributing to this response share the government's ambition to create an education system that benefits all children and addresses the long-standing imbalances that have prevented too many children from receiving the support, recognition and opportunities they need.

We welcome the direction of travel towards a more inclusive system and the recognition that the education system itself must adapt to children and young people, rather than expecting children to fit a narrow model of success. However, we are concerned that the reforms as currently proposed may not go far enough to deliver that ambition in practice. In particular, without changes to the incentives, accountability arrangements, expectations and pathways that shape school behaviour, there is a risk that the reforms will be absorbed into existing systems rather than driving the shift to inclusion that the schools white paper intends.

A concern for the organisations contributing to this response is how the reforms will recognise and respond to children and young people with social, emotional and mental health needs, including those experiencing mental ill health or diagnosed mental health conditions. We recognise that the SEND reforms propose moving away from some existing categories of need, including SEMH as a formal category. However, whatever terminology is adopted, these children and young people must remain clearly visible in the system. Many are currently among those most likely to experience persistent absence, exclusion, placement in alternative provision, disengagement from learning or poor transitions into adulthood. Where this response refers to SEMH, we do so as shorthand for a wider set of social, emotional, relational and mental health needs, including needs that may not be formally identified through existing SEND categories. Our recommendations are therefore concerned not with preserving terminology for its own sake, but with ensuring the needs, strengths and voices of these children and young people are recognised and supported.

Central to our response are the young people sometimes referred to as the 'forgotten third'. We use this term to describe the significant group of children and young people whose strengths, progress, and potential are not fully recognised by the current system. This includes young people who may not thrive in a predominantly academic pathway, those with SEND, those with social, emotional, relational or mental health needs, those experiencing mental ill health, those in or at risk of entering alternative provision, those at risk of exclusion or persistent absence and those who may be more likely to become NEET without earlier and more personalised support. We use the term not to label young people but to highlight the responsibility of the system to serve all children and young people, and to recognise a broader range of talents, needs and routes to success.

At present, the system does not always recognise schools that are working inclusively with complex cohorts, nor does it consistently value the full range of ways in which children and young people can achieve. Measures that rely heavily on national averages can obscure the progress made by schools in serving communities with greater levels of need. Similarly, accountability frameworks that prioritise a narrow set of academic outcomes can make practical, vocational, relational and wellbeing outcomes less visible. This means that the young people who most need the schools white paper's ambition to succeed can remain unseen by the system until they reach crisis point.

We have organised our response around three interconnected recommendations, each addressing what we believe are major levers for change:

- **Recommendation 1. Place inclusion at the heart of young people's school experience by broadening 'what counts' in accountability to improve outcomes for the 'forgotten third'**

Inclusion will only be sustained if the accountability and incentive structures that shape school behaviours are aligned with inclusive practice. We recommend new inclusion measures, better use of existing and new data, stronger pupil voice, and clearer shared accountability between MATs and local authorities. These changes would help schools identify their strengths and areas for development, support a more self-improving system and keep the child at the centre.

- **Recommendation 2. Build inclusive practice into every school**

Reformed accountability must be matched by clear and supported expectations of what schools are required to do. We recommend a statutory Inclusive Practice Framework that defines what genuine inclusion looks like, requires schools to embed evidence-based approaches to social, emotional and mental health needs, and ensures the right definitions, training and leadership capacity are in place to sustain change over time.

- **Recommendation 3. Value and integrate vocational pathways to reduce NEETs and broaden what success looks like for every young person**

Neither accountability reform nor practice reform will fully reach the young people most at risk unless vocational and technical pathways are treated as equally valid routes to achievement and adulthood. We recommend reforming performance frameworks to recognise vocational outcomes, making pathways visible before 16, and aligning local systems around shared outcomes for young people at risk of becoming NEET.

Together, these recommendations are designed to work as a system rather than a list of separate asks. Measurement reform changes incentives. Practice reform ensures schools have the knowledge and capability to respond. Vocational reform ensures the full range of young people's strengths, aspirations and depths are recognised. Without all three, the government's ambition to ensure that every child is achieving and thriving will be harder to realise.

The rest of this document develops each recommendation in detail, with specific actions which, if implemented, would support better outcomes for children and young people; particularly for those whose strengths, needs and aspirations have not been consistently recognised by the current system.

Scope

This response presents recommendations primarily directed towards stakeholders operating at a regulatory and policy level, namely Ofsted and the Department for Education. Recommendations relating to requirements across schools will extend to Multi-Academy Trusts and local authorities. Finally, this response will concern stakeholders at the level of school leadership and further education colleges where the practical implementation of guidance and operational procedures are concerned.

Participating organisations

This response document has been collectively written by a cross-sector group who are actively working to improve outcomes for children and young people across mental health, alternative provision, youth support, school leadership, and inclusion. The group includes organisations with direct experience of supporting children and young people, working with schools and local systems, and advocating for more inclusive approaches to education.

Wates Family Enterprise Trust (WFET) acted as a neutral convenor for this process. Following a request from organisations within the sector, WFET shared the opportunity with its Inclusive Education Community and supported a process for interested organisations to come together, discuss the schools white paper and SEND reform proposals and develop shared recommendations. WFET's role has been to enable collaboration and dialogue across the network, rather than to determine the content or position of the group. Social Finance supported the design and facilitation of the workshops that informed this response.

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Recommendation 1.

Place inclusion at the heart of young people’s school experience by broadening ‘what counts’ in accountability to improve outcomes for the ‘forgotten third’ and making inclusion, internal AP use, EHCP delivery, and pupil voice visible in school profiles and trust standards.

The problem

The publication of the schools white paper reflects a notable shift in government discourse, moving away from the predominantly data-driven, attainment-focused system of previous administrations towards a more child-centred approach. This emerging narrative places greater emphasis on belonging, wellbeing and inclusion. We welcome the recognition of the need to support all children and young people to thrive, however, existing accountability structures can create incentives that make inclusive practice harder to sustain.

For example, a school that actively admits and supports pupils with complex needs, including those with SEND, SEMH needs, or prior exclusions, will likely see this reflected in its headline attainment data. That school may appear to be performing worse than a neighbouring school that admits a less complex cohort, not because its practice is weaker, but because its commitment to inclusion is stronger.¹ Under current accountability arrangements, the more inclusive school is penalised for doing exactly what the schools white paper intends.

Therefore, while the schools white paper signals a welcome recognition of the broader purposes of education and the need to support all children and young people to thrive, it is not yet matched by the underlying system architecture. Indeed, three fundamental issues remain unaddressed:

- Accountability measures continue to inadequately reflect pupil context and cohort complexity.
- The accountability system creates perverse incentives that can actively discourage inclusive practice.
- It continues to prioritise narrow academic outcomes over wider measures of inclusion, wellbeing, and long-term development.

¹ O'Reagan, C., Huband-Thompson, B. & Culliane, C. (2026) Selective Inclusion: The Interplay of SEND and Disadvantage in School Admissions. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/selective-inclusion> [Accessed 09 May 2026]

Why it matters

This matters because the current school performance measures prevent schools from embracing inclusive practices. This has created structural inequality within the system, as inclusive schools are more likely to appear to be underperforming. This creates perverse incentives around admissions, exclusions, and pupil movement, as schools seek to protect headline performance outcomes.² Schools ultimately engage in harmful behaviours, such as off-rolling and reluctance to admit pupils with additional needs, to increase measures of academic success.³

Beyond perverse incentives around admissions and exclusions, the current accountability structure also fails to capture what matters most for children's long-term outcomes. Wellbeing and belonging are widely recognised as critical factors to improve outcomes for children and young people⁴ and if better measures of engagement, relationships, belonging and personal development existed, they could help drive schools towards relational and preventative approaches that underpin effective and sustainable inclusion.

Only by reforming incentive structures and making data more visible can inclusion be meaningfully embedded across the system. Schools should be empowered to assess their own inclusivity through a clear, evidence-informed framework, enabling them to identify strengths, areas for development, and progress over time. This fosters a culture of professional autonomy and reflective practice, where schools are encouraged to improve not in response to external comparison alone, but through a constructive form of internal benchmarking.

What the government should do

We have the following two sub-recommendations that will begin to address some of these challenges.

1.1 Build new inclusion measures and monitoring frameworks using existing datasets, adding missing data, and embedding pupil voice

To make inclusion genuinely visible, we recommend building a new Inclusion and Participation Scorecard that starts with utilising data that already exists, adds the missing pieces, and utilises pupil voice.

2 The Centre for Social Justice (2024) *Suspending Reality. Part 2: Exclusion rates and inclusive practice in multi-academy trusts*. Available at: https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/CSJ-Suspending_Reality_Part_2.pdf [Accessed 09 May 2026]

3 King, S. (2026). "It's just misunderstood kids". School exclusion, SEND and the reproduction of inequality. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 31(1), 56–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2025.2546768>

4 Rovnaghi C.R., Castilla-Liu D., Lee A.M., Shrivastava A. & Anand K.J.S. (2025) Promoting Child Wellness: A Narrative Review of Positive Childhood Experiences. *Behav. Sci. (Basel)*. doi: 10.3390/bs15111432

How they should do this

1.1.1 Create an Inclusion and Participation Scorecard to unlock existing data across the system to help build awareness and understanding of inclusiveness

We believe there is a significant opportunity to bring together data that already exists across the system, making it visible and usable in a way it currently is not. This will support schools, MATs, and local authorities to best understand their levels of inclusiveness and surface areas of enquiry to better improve inclusion. Existing measures of school inclusion often rely on self-assessment, which is not contextualised, and while this is a good first step, it could be strengthened by incorporating school data. Our vision is that this scorecard is not another accountability measure, but rather a way for schools to build their understanding of their inclusiveness.

We recommend that the Inclusion and Participation Scorecard should bring together the following data points to help build an understanding of a school's inclusiveness:

- **Context and composition.** Understanding a school's inclusiveness requires considering its pupil context and cohort complexity, not just headline outcomes. Inclusive schools often serve more complex intakes, which can distort comparisons if viewed in isolation. Measures such as suspension rates may be misleading without accounting for this context. A fair scorecard should therefore establish a baseline using factors including SEND prevalence, disadvantage levels, pupil mobility, and prior attainment to ensure that inclusiveness is assessed accurately and meaningfully.
- **Formal inclusion outcomes.** The scorecard should consolidate existing formal metrics, including attendance, absence, suspensions, exclusions, managed moves, reintegration, and current attainment, into a single, accessible view. By bringing currently fragmented data together, it enables clearer, at-a-glance insight into inclusion outcomes across schools.
- **Additional school-level data.** The Inclusion and Participation Scorecard should incorporate additional pupil- and school-level data to provide a richer picture of inclusive practice. This includes use of alternative provision, internal support and sanctions, as well as recognition and praise systems and pupil wellbeing data. These measures offer deeper insight into whether pupils are genuinely thriving, not just attending or avoiding exclusion, and support a more holistic understanding of inclusion.

If implemented successfully, the scorecard could provide every school with a meaningful mirror and benchmark their inclusiveness against schools in similar contexts. A school could build a strong understanding of areas of strength, potential gaps, and what lines of inquiry are worth pursuing to improve. For local authorities, it provides a consistent, evidence-based foundation for identifying where support is needed, replacing the current patchwork of partial data with something that could be acted on.

1.1.2 Add new items to pupil-level returns and the School Census

There are a few data points, which if added to pupil-level returns and the School Census could improve visibility and analysis of a school's inclusiveness, and would support the data set that could exist within **an Inclusion and Participation Scorecard**.

- **Time spent within part-time Alternative Provision (AP) placements or the use of internal AP.** This means pupils can spend significant time outside mainstream classrooms without formal tracking. To improve transparency and accountability, all AP placements should be recorded at pupil level, including type, hours, provider, reason, duration, and reintegration plans.
- **Use of in-school support units and internal suspension rooms.** Use of in-school support units and internal suspension rooms should be transparently recorded, as these are currently widespread but absent from national data. Capturing pupil-level information, including duration and reintegration plans, would strengthen accountability and provide a more accurate picture of inclusive practice within schools.
- **An 'at risk' indicator.** We recommend introducing a clearly defined 'at risk' flag within pupil-level data, triggered by indicators such as repeated suspensions, low attendance, or repeated use of alternative provision. This should act as an early warning mechanism, rather than a label, enabling timely, coordinated intervention, including automated referrals where appropriate. To ensure consistency and effectiveness, trigger criteria must be nationally defined, consistently applied, and regularly reviewed.

1.1.3 Use the Pupil Engagement framework to truly embed pupil voice and champion children and young people who often don't have a voice

Crucially, it is imperative that pupil voice is at the forefront of all reforms. The schools white paper's commitment to publish a new Pupil Engagement Framework is a positive step forward. It will provide schools with a standard set of evidence-based questions to develop a shared understanding of children's needs and the contexts in which they are learning. For the framework to truly reach its potential, we recommend it includes the following characteristics:

- **Consistent and comparable reporting.** Schools should be required to report on the outcomes of the Pupil Engagement Framework in a consistent manner, so data can be comparable across localities and nationally. It is understandable, and we agree, that some schools and localities may want to add questions relevant to their own context, but this must sit alongside a core set of questions that enables a like-for-like comparison. On reporting of outcomes, we are recommending that outcomes should be reported as distributions and year-on-year change, not single scores. This will create a more accurate picture of a school over time and avoids creating a new league table of pupil happiness.
- **Independent administration.** To ensure robust data accuracy and authenticity, the survey should not be administered by schools themselves, but through a register of accredited providers. We think approved independent organisations administering the framework would support robust data collection and consistent implementation.

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- **Reaching marginalised pupils.** The Pupil Engagement Framework must be specifically designed to include the voices of the most marginalised pupils, such as those who are severely absent, in AP settings, have English as an additional language, or have communication needs that a standard written survey would not reach. These pupils, who can struggle to access education, are exactly the voices most important to hear. We recommend that for these cohorts of pupils, alternative methodologies beyond surveys are utilised, to ensure their input is included.

By embedding these principles within the Pupil Engagement Framework, pupil voice can become a meaningful driver of inclusive practice, ensuring that insights from children and young people directly inform improvement and accountability at every level of the system, as well as providing a unique view of the challenges and lived experiences of children and young people today.

1.2 Build clarity around the respective roles of MATs and local authorities

The schools white paper envisages a trust-led system, with new trust standards and inspection arrangements, while simultaneously signalling that local authorities should play a strengthened role in supporting and challenging schools on inclusion. This creates a clear tension at the heart of the proposed reforms. While the direction of travel towards a trust-led system is evident, the absence of clearly defined roles and responsibilities risks creating ambiguity, fragmentation, and inconsistent implementation across the system. To address this tension, it is essential that the Department for Education takes a more directive role in clarifying system leadership. We propose the introduction of Local Inclusion and Participation Agreements (LIPAs) – establishing clear guidelines on responsibility, accountability for inclusion, and coordinated place-based approaches to the needs of children and young people. LIPAs should be a statutory requirement for all MATs. Evidence of their effectiveness, as well as the relationship to the LA, should form part of every MAT's Ofsted inspection.

How they should do this

1.2.1 Local authority inclusion intervention powers

Local authorities often lack both the visibility and authority to intervene early when a child is at risk of exclusion, is unwell, or has an unmet SEMH need. LIPAs would address this by establishing clear escalation pathways, enabling coordinated multi-agency action and requiring timely, structured support plans from schools or trusts. These escalation pathways should be supported by nationally agreed indicators, such as repeated suspensions, declining attendance, or unmet additional needs – ensuring consistent and timely intervention. Using live data and automated referral routes, pupils can be identified early, enabling local authorities to act swiftly and proportionately.

1.2.2 Cross-boundary contact and multi-agency working

To enable cross-agency and cross-boundary collaboration, we recommend the following activities are explicitly included within LIPAs:

- Requiring a named LA link officer for each LA in which a MAT operates, and a named trust inclusion lead, with published contact routes and nationally recommended response standards
- Explicitly naming health and social care as required participants in multi-agency inclusion panels, with a named lead from each service and a defined response standard

1.2.3 Secure data sharing between MATs and relevant local authorities

LIPAs should establish a secure data-sharing agreement between each MAT and its relevant LA covering: Inclusion and Participation Scorecard data; EHCP delivery statements; and pupil voice trends. The purpose is to enable local problem-solving before children reach crisis point. Creating the data infrastructure between LAs and MATs will enable earlier identification and provide opportunities for the LA to provide early intervention.

What changes if we get this right

A more inclusive accountability system would ensure schools are recognised, not penalised, for supporting pupils with complex needs and prioritising belonging alongside attainment. By making inclusion visible through robust data, schools would better understand their true performance, while local authorities could intervene earlier. Over time, this would reduce reliance on costly specialist provision, deliver system-wide efficiencies, and ensure that vulnerable children are identified and supported before reaching crisis point.

If implemented effectively, the scorecard would provide schools with a clear benchmark of inclusiveness against similar contexts, helping identify strengths and areas for improvement. For regulators and local authorities, it would establish a consistent, evidence-based foundation for support and accountability, replacing fragmented data with a cohesive, actionable system.

Collecting detailed data on alternative provision is essential to distinguish between its appropriate use as planned, time-limited support and its misuse as informal exclusion. Making this visible will highlight strong practice and challenge poor practice. Alongside this, outcomes should be reported as distributions and tracked over time, rather than reduced to single scores, to provide a more accurate and balanced picture and avoid creating reductive comparisons in areas such as pupil wellbeing.

If implemented effectively, LIPAs would reshape how accountability for inclusion is shared across the system by closing existing gaps between power and responsibility. In fragmented systems, unclear roles and weak collaboration can allow children to fall through the cracks, highlighting the need for coordinated accountability; LIPAs address this by establishing structured relationships and enabling timely, joined-up support across agencies

Recommendation 2.

Build inclusive practice into every school by introducing a statutory Inclusive Practice Framework, supported by shared definitions, workforce development, school leadership and sustainable implementation.

The problem

The schools white paper marks a significant and welcome shift in direction. It recognises that the education system itself must adapt to children and young people, rather than expecting children and young people to fit a narrow model of success. This is particularly important for children with SEND, neurodivergent children, and children with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs.

To realise this ambition in practice, schools will need a shared understanding of what inclusive practice means, how it should be embedded and how it will be supported over time. The schools white paper creates a strong foundation for this, but there is currently limited clarity on how this ambition will be embedded consistently across schools, how implementation will be assessed and what mechanisms will support sustained delivery over time. More explicit expectations would help schools translate the schools white paper's intent into everyday practice, particularly in a system where interpretation and capacity vary widely.

Why it matters

This matters because children and young people with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs are often among those most likely to experience exclusion, persistent absence, disengagement from learning, placement in alternative provision, or more difficult transitions into post-16 education, employment and training.

Clearer inclusive practice would benefit all pupils, while being particularly important for those whose needs are currently less visible or less consistently understood. This includes children with SEND, children experiencing mental ill health, children in or at risk of entering alternative provision, and pupils whose needs intersect with poverty, race, language, care experience, LGBT+, or asylum-seeking status. Guidance should recognise these overlapping experiences so that inclusive practice reflects pupils' lived realities rather than assuming a single route to support.

It also matters for schools and staff. Teachers and school leaders are being asked to respond to increasingly complex needs in challenging financial and workforce conditions.

They need training, resources, leadership support and protected time to do this confidently and sustainably. Investment in inclusive practice should therefore be understood not only as a child outcomes strategy, but also as a workforce development and retention strategy.⁵

There is a wider system benefit. If mainstream schools are better supported to meet needs earlier, specialist and alternative provision can be used more effectively for the children and young people who need it most, supporting a more responsive, sustainable and inclusive system overall.

What the government should do

We have the following two sub-recommendations that will begin to address some of these challenges.

2.1. Develop shared principles and definitions for inclusion, belonging and early identification alongside development of an Inclusive Practice Framework

The DfE and Ofsted should jointly publish shared principles for inclusion, belonging and early identification, applied consistently across the schools white paper, SEND reform proposals, Ofsted framework and school-level guidance. These principles should set out the essential features of inclusive practice.

How they should do this

2.1.1 Consistent definitions and meanings

Greater consistency would be helpful in how the terms “inclusion”, “belonging” and “early identification” are used across the schools white paper, SEND reform proposals, Ofsted framework and school-level guidance. A shared language would help schools understand expectations clearly and support more consistent practice across the system.

Firstly, it would be helpful to distinguish more clearly between inclusion, which should apply to all pupils, and SEND, which applies to children and young people with identified additional needs. This distinction matters because inclusion should be a universal expectation, while SEND support must remain focused on those with additional and more complex needs.

⁵ Munson, R., Nurek, M., Brookes, J. et al. (2026) Shifting perspectives on pupils: staff perceptions of the Nurturing Kent Programme. *The International Journal of Nurture in Education* 11, pp.52-72. https://www.nurtureuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/International-Journal-of-Nurture-in-Education-2025-26_3-Shifting-perspectives-on-pupils.pdf; Dwan-O'Reilly, M., Walsh, L., Booth, A. et al. (2024) *Measuring School Staff Confidence and Worries to Deliver Mental Health Content: An Examination of the Psychometric Properties of Two Measures in a Sample of Secondary School Staff*. *School Mental Health* 16, pp.41-52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-023-09616-8>

Secondly, a clear distinction between universal inclusion and targeted SEND support would help ensure that pupils receive support earlier, whether or not they have a formal SEND identification, while protecting targeted support for children and young people with the most complex identified needs.

Thirdly, we would recommend that the definition of early identification should be extended to recognise that needs can emerge at any stage of childhood or adolescence, including following illness, injury, trauma or significant life events. While we welcome the schools white paper's focus on early identification, if this is limited to early years and reception it may exclude meeting needs that first became apparent later in childhood or adolescence.

Finally, as set out in the introduction, the proposed move away from SEMH as a formal category of need makes it especially important that children and young people with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs remain visible in the system. Whatever terminology is adopted, these needs must continue to be recognised and supported. This includes children experiencing mental ill health, children with diagnosed mental health conditions, and children whose needs may not yet be formally identified.

2.1.2 Develop an Inclusive Practice Framework

We recommend that DfE introduces a statutory Inclusive Practice Framework for all state-funded schools. The framework should establish a clear national expectation for inclusive practice, while allowing schools to adapt implementation to their context and community. Although statutory, it should not operate as a narrow compliance tool. Its purpose should be to build capacity, consistency and confidence across the system.

It should include the following components:

- **Clear guidance on inclusive provision**

The framework should include best-practice guidance on inclusive provision. This statutory guidance should be co-produced with practitioners, children, young people, parents, carers and relevant experts. The guidance should name evidence-based approaches while avoiding over-prescription, with the Gatsby Benchmarks providing a useful model of clear national expectations that allow for local flexibility. For some children and young people, flexible access to high-quality remote or blended learning, where appropriate and delivered by qualified teachers, may form part of an inclusive response. This should be understood as a way of sustaining engagement and participation, not as a substitute for the wider responsibility to support belonging and inclusion. The DfE should pilot the statutory inclusion plan requirement before national rollout, including a diverse range of mainstream schools, special schools, alternative provision, schools with high levels of disadvantage, rural schools, and schools in areas with different local authority and MAT arrangements.

- **Contain a requirement that all schools develop a school inclusion plan**

All state-funded schools should be required to demonstrate, through an annual school-level inclusion plan, how they are embedding inclusive practice. The plan should show how the school is:

- Identifying emerging needs early
- Supporting pupils with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs
- using evidence-based whole-school approaches
- engaging pupils, parents and carers
- working with local partners
- reviewing the impact of its approach over time.

School-level inclusion plans should be co-designed with children, young people, parents, carers, staff and local partners, and should link to the Pupil Engagement Framework referenced in Recommendation 1. For some schools, meaningful co-design will require a shift in culture and practice; this should be recognised in implementation support so that co-design strengthens inclusive practice rather than becoming a procedural requirement.

- **Require evidence of embedding whole-school approaches**

The Inclusive Practice Framework should require schools to embed at least one evidence-based whole-school approach to supporting social, emotional, relational and mental health needs as part of their universal offer. Examples could include:

- trauma-informed practice
- relational pedagogy
- nurture approaches
- restorative practice
- other evidence-based approaches that support belonging, emotional regulation, relationships and engagement.

Schools should be expected to demonstrate how the chosen approaches are being implemented. This could include staff training through an accredited provider, use of validated tools, achievement of an appropriate quality mark, or evidence of impact through attendance, engagement, wellbeing and pupil voice data.

As well as whole-school approaches, the framework should also recognise that inclusive practice can extend beyond the school gates. Schools should be encouraged to develop formal partnerships with community and third-sector organisations working with children and young people with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs.

- **Build learning, evidence and accountability over time**

The Inclusive Practice Framework should be supported by a national approach to identifying, testing and sharing effective practice. The RISE infrastructure should be used to identify schools and settings that are successfully embedding inclusive approaches, including those working with complex cohorts and those whose practice may not otherwise be visible nationally. This should include mainstream schools, special schools, alternative provision and schools working closely with community and third-sector partners.

DfE should develop a national case study bank and invest in communities of practice, connecting schools that are further ahead with those earlier in the journey. The Framework should be reviewed every three years, with input from practitioners, young people, parents, carers and the research community and DfE should publish an annual progress report on inclusion outcomes, drawing on the Inclusion and Participation Scorecard data detailed in Recommendation 1.

2.2 Create the necessary infrastructure to support schools to implement inclusive practices

For the goals of the schools white paper to be successful, we believe that a surrounding infrastructure is crucial. Without the necessary support, uptake and progress of inclusive initiatives will be limited and slow.

How they should do this

2.2.1 Create a national register of accredited inclusion and SEMH CPD providers

A national register of accredited providers of training in inclusion and social, emotional, relational and mental health practice would help schools identify quality-assured training and support greater consistency across the system. The register could be modelled on existing approaches to accreditation in initial teacher training.

We recommend a tiered approach:

- All staff should receive baseline training in social, emotional, relational and mental health needs.
- This should be built into ITT, ECT progression, Teachers' Standards and relevant NPQs.
- Staff with named inclusion responsibilities should receive deeper accredited training.

An interim recommended approaches list should be published while the full register is developed. This could draw on existing quality marks and accreditation models, including Trauma Informed Schools UK and nurtureuk.

2.2.2 Strengthen school leadership for inclusion

School leadership is crucial to embedding inclusive practice. Inclusion is a whole-school leadership responsibility, not something held only by the SENCO or pastoral team. To achieve this, we recommend that:

- SENCOs should be part of the senior leadership team.
- Schools should review how SENCO, mental health lead, and designated safeguarding lead roles work together.
- Reflective practice should be built into these roles.
- Senior leaders should be accountable for the school's inclusion plan.
- Inclusion should be reflected in school improvement planning and workforce development.

This would give inclusion the organisational weight it needs and help ensure that responsibility for social, emotional, relational and mental health support is shared across the school.

2.2.3 Fund implementation

The Framework, CPD register and school-level inclusion plan requirement should be accompanied by dedicated funding. Schools will need the resources, training and implementation support to embed these changes well.

The Inclusive Mainstream Fund should explicitly protect investment for inclusive practice and social, emotional, relational and mental health provision, so that funding is not absorbed by wider budget pressures. DfE should also model the longer-term financial case for investment in inclusive practice, including the potential to support more children in mainstream settings and make more effective use of specialist and alternative provision. Less reliance on out-of-school provision, alternative provision and independent special schools has the potential to support longer-term sustainability.⁶

2.2.4 Protect teacher workload and implementation time

The schools white paper states that reforms should not add to teacher workload. While we welcome this commitment, we believe this is already an ambitious aim. We also recognise that many of our recommendations across this paper could increase this even further, on a workforce under significant pressure. Therefore, we recommend that the DfE reviews teaching workload and conducts a consultation with teachers and other school staff, with a view to reducing teaching workload so all reforms, and our

⁶ A 2025 report commissioned by Northern Ireland's Department of Education found that nurture provision delivers £2.34 – £4.05 in benefits for every £1 invested, with measurable improvements in attendance, attainment equivalent to 1.5 – 2.7 GCSE grades per pupil, and a reduction in SEN escalation. Department of Education (Northern Ireland). (2025) *RSM Nurture Research: Final Report*. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-01/RSM%20Nurture%20Research%20Final%20Report%20%28July%202025%29.PDF>

recommendations can be implemented. At minimum, we would recommend that any reform that is implemented monitors teaching workload to avoid any unintended consequences.

What changes if we get this right

If the Inclusive Practice Framework is implemented well, schools will have a clearer and more consistent understanding of what inclusive practice looks like and what is expected of them.

Children and young people with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs would be more likely to receive support earlier, regardless of which school they attend. This includes children whose needs emerge during adolescence, children experiencing mental ill health, children with diagnosed conditions, and children whose needs do not fit neatly into existing categories.

Schools would be better equipped to create environments where children feel safe, known, valued and able to learn. Staff would have greater confidence, stronger training and clearer leadership support. Inclusion would become part of whole-school improvement, rather than an additional responsibility held by a small number of staff.

A clearer distinction between universal inclusion and SEND support would help ensure that all pupils benefit from inclusive practice, while SEND resources remain focused on pupils with additional and more complex needs.

Over time, stronger inclusive practice could reduce escalation, improve attendance and engagement, support better post-16 transitions, and enable specialist and alternative provision to be used more effectively.⁷ Most importantly, it would help create a system in which more children and young people have their strengths recognised, their needs understood, and their routes to success supported.

We want to be clear that in calling for stronger requirements, we are not calling for more pressure on schools. Schools are already navigating significant workforce, financial and capacity challenges. What clearer expectations offer is not additional burden, but greater certainty about what good inclusive practice looks like, what schools can be supported to work towards, and how progress will be recognised. A shared national baseline reduces the risk that inclusion becomes a postcode lottery, developing well where individual leaders prioritise it and poorly where they do not. Used well, these mechanisms become a foundation for improvement rather than a source of anxiety.

⁷ Rahmani, H., Groot, W. & Rahmani, A. M. (2024). Unravelling the NEET phenomenon: a systematic literature review and meta-analysis of risk factors for youth not in education, employment, or training. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 29(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2024.2331576>

Recommendation 3.

Value and integrate vocational pathways to reduce NEETs and broaden what success looks like for every young person.

The problem

We strongly support the ambition within the *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* white paper for every child to achieve and thrive. For this to be a success, however, we are clear that children and young people need to have awareness of, opportunities to choose, and recognition of vocational and technical routes. Too many young people experience an education system that fails to support and recognise their aspirations. We believe that a young person who wants to become an electrician, a construction worker or a healthcare assistant should be able to progress confidently through education towards that goal. While schools are required to deliver impartial careers guidance that includes vocational pathways, this is not sufficiently embedded. At present, these pathways are often unclear, undervalued or inaccessible. Not because young people lack ability or ambition, but because the system is not designed with their destinations in mind.

Part of this inequity is a cultural problem. Vocational qualifications are still widely perceived as the second-best option, a fallback for those who cannot manage academic routes rather than a valid and valued pathway in their own right. This perception is reinforced by a system that treats vocational qualifications as peripheral to accountability. Changing it requires not just new frameworks but a deliberate and sustained effort to reframe what success looks like in education.

Why it matters

Currently there is a crisis of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Latest figures show 957,000 young people aged 16–24 are classified as NEET, representing 12.8% of that cohort.⁸ This signals a failure to support the aspirations of nearly a million young people. Becoming NEET is rarely a sudden event after age 16. It is often the culmination of earlier disengagement, which can begin when a young person does not see a pathway that reflects their strengths, interests or aspirations.

Evidence suggests that personalised, vocationally relevant programmes for disengaged pupils can contribute to improvements in engagement, attendance and aspiration.⁹

8 Office of National Statistics (ONS) (2026). Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK, February 2026. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/february2026>

9 Cowen, G. & Burgess, M. (2009) *Key Stage 4 Engagement Programme Evaluation*. DCSF Research Report RR084. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families. Available at: <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/key-stage-4-engagement-programme-dcsf.pdf>

Practitioners confirm this. When young people achieve vocational success, it moves their self-image from one of failure to recognition that achievement is possible. Evidence from countries with well-established vocational systems suggests that access to high-quality, relevant vocational pathways can have positive effects on young people's wellbeing.

We know from countries with well-established vocational systems, such as Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Denmark that embedding vocational routes as an equal and valued part of the curriculum is associated with significantly lower rates of young people becoming NEET. During the 2008 financial crisis, when youth unemployment spiked across Europe, these countries were notably less affected, pointing to the protective effect of systems that treat vocational and academic routes as equally valid from an early age.¹⁰

A good example of this working is from within Bradford. Here, the **Bradford Alternative Provision Academy** working with the Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforce has successfully contributed to NEET rates of 15% and below over a five-year period. They have achieved this through a personalised model of support, including a dedicated member of staff working with each young person to navigate post-16 applications and transitions, with ongoing access to wider multi-agency support where needed.

Finally, vocational pathways are an equity consideration too. Vocational pathways can be valuable to any demographic of young people; but can be particularly important to the most marginalised and disadvantaged young people; including those with SEND, and those at risk of disengagement.

Case study from Building Futures Together

In an alternative provision setting in Leeds, a young person who had previously disengaged from mainstream education re-engaged through vocational construction pathways delivered by Building Futures Together. In mainstream school, the young person was exhibiting disruptive behaviour; this created a cycle of punishment that increased poor choices and led to further disruptive behaviour due to the young person feeling pushed out. The young person's interest and engagement increased through accessing a hands-on learning experience while additionally the plumbing and electrical scenarios helped improve the learner's basic maths and English. Through sustained participation, they progressed to achieving a Level 1 qualification, developed mentoring responsibilities and secured employment with the provider. The programme also supported improvements in behaviour, confidence and aspiration, demonstrating the role vocational pathways can play in re-engagement and progression.

As John Thornton, Managing Director of Building Futures Together, reflects:

“Vocational learning, especially the trades, offers a way of learning with maths and English at its core without the learner realising it. Learners link things to the value it has to them; in particular if they can understand the relevance to a future job.”

10 Kriesi, I., Graf, L. & Schweri, J. (2024) *Vocational Education and Training*. Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational and Professional Education and Training. Available at: https://www.ehb.swiss/sites/default/files/2025-10/Kriesi_Graf_Schweri_2024_Vocational%20Education%20and%20Training_Preprint.pdf

What the government should do

We have the following three sub-recommendations that will begin to address some of these challenges.

3.1 Reform performance to recognise technical and vocational outcomes

Academic outcomes remain the primary measure of school success. Vocational qualifications sit outside core accountability measures, creating an active disincentive for schools to prioritise them. Schools that respond to pupils' strengths and aspirations by offering access to vocational pathways can be disadvantaged under current accountability measures, as these pathways can affect their performance against the 'national average' and ultimately their Ofsted judgements. This mismatch is unfair and structurally counterproductive.

How they should do this

3.1.1 Broaden how success is defined and measured

Performance frameworks should be reformed to treat vocational and technical routes as equally valid and high-quality outcomes in and of themselves. In particular, we want to draw attention to how Progress 8 incentivises schools to enrol pupils for specific subjects. This means that young people with passion to pursue vocational routes can be disincentivised from pursuing qualifications relevant to their interests and aspirations, and schools are structurally penalised for doing the right thing for individual young people.

Specifically, performance frameworks should:

- Recognise vocational and technical routes as positive outcomes, which are as important as academic qualifications, particularly where they are at recognised qualification levels.
- We recommend that Progress 8 should be evaluated to assess how this informs schools' decision-making about the qualifications and routes they make available to young people.
- Measure individual journeys and sustained destinations, not just attainment at 16.
- Track outcomes at 6, 12 and 24 months post-16, so that schools are recognised for where their pupils go, not just what grades they achieve.
- Explicitly recognise functional skills qualifications within performance measures. At present, there are many appropriate qualifications for young people, but these do not count in league tables, meaning the young people who achieve them remain invisible in attainment data despite making real progress.

While we speak here about equivalencies, we want to be explicit that vocational pathways do not have to always be comparable. Where they can, they should, but more

importantly we want to move towards an education system that, regardless of whether you are on an academic or vocational pathway, the most important measures are learning progress and readiness for life beyond education.

3.1.2 Recognise progression and engagement, not just attainment

Within our first recommendation we spoke about building new inclusion measures and monitoring frameworks using existing datasets, adding missing data, and embedding pupil voice. This is also worth drawing attention to here. We believe that sometimes attainment alone can hide other progression signals, and we would welcome additional data capture to best recognise pupils' progress. We think this should include:

- Participation in vocational or work-related learning.
- Progression measures for pupils with additional needs or complex backgrounds.
- Take-up of vocational tasters at Key Stage 3 and 4.

Vocational equivalents to Level 2 academic qualifications already exist. Establishing and communicating this parity clearly would help both young people and employers understand the value of what is being achieved.

3.2 Make vocational pathways visible and easier to access for pupils

Pathways are not visible early enough. Many young people are not exposed to vocational routes early enough to support informed decision-making. Decisions at Key Stage 4 are often constrained by prior attainment, and by the time young people reach 16, the range of options available to them has already been significantly narrowed.

Vocational routes are more expensive and harder to access. Due to a shortage of specialist practitioners, vocational provision costs schools more than academic provision. This creates a double disincentive: schools face higher costs for vocational provision while simultaneously being penalised in league tables for offering it. This workforce capacity problem should be understood in similar terms to the experts-at-hand model, as a supply issue that requires deliberate national intervention, not just guidance.

How they should do this

3.2.1 Make vocational pathways visible and accessible before 16

Vocational pathways cannot begin at 16 and be expected to prevent NEET. The groundwork needs to be laid significantly earlier. Schools should be supported and expected to:

- Provide structured exposure to vocational learning from Key Stage 3 onwards.
- Deliver high-quality, impartial careers education that includes technical and vocational routes as genuinely equal options, not fallbacks.

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- Build meaningful partnerships with FE colleges, independent training providers and employers, and consider how specialised vocational learning organisations could be formally connected to MAT structures, bringing business into education earlier and more systematically.

This will ensure that young people are able to understand and access emerging post-16 pathways, supporting better decision-making at Key Stage 4 and stronger transitions into post-16 education, training and employment.

3.3 Align local systems around transition and NEET reduction

Transitions remain fragmented. Schools, FE colleges, local authorities and employers operate to different measures, making it harder for young people, particularly those with additional needs, to navigate transitions without falling through the gaps. In some areas, college admissions criteria effectively bar young people with any exclusion history from accessing further education, regardless of how long ago or what has changed since. FE colleges in particular need resources and funding so they can be more flexible in meeting the needs of this cohort.

Additionally, skills are not consistently recognised. Young people cannot easily demonstrate what they can do beyond what their qualifications say. Employers and providers can find it difficult to interpret vocational achievements, and young people moving between settings, including those in AP, risk having their prior learning entirely unrecognised.

How they should do this

3.3.1 Strengthen alignment between schools and local systems to support transitions

One of the central reasons NEET reduction is difficult is that schools, colleges, local authorities and employers are held accountable to different outcomes. This can result in a failed transition, with the young person falling between institutions that are each meeting their own measure of success.

We recommend the creation of a consistent framework that could be used across schools, FE, and LAs, which aligns local systems. This framework should be developed by DfE in co-production with all stakeholders, with the central framing asking 'how can we align accountabilities across the system to reduce the number of pupils becoming NEET?' We imagine this framework would answer questions like:

- How are FE admissions criteria enabling or blocking access for a diverse cohort of pupils?
- How is alternative provision measured on reintegration and destination outcomes?
- How are schools enabling pupils to understand and plan for their post-16 destinations?

We believe this framework could:

- Reduce NEET figures at a local level.
- Improve participation for specific at-risk groups.
- Create stronger transitions between school, FE, training and work.

This works best when schools are not held to account for outcomes they cannot influence alone, local authorities and combined authorities share responsibility for tracking and support, and data is shared sensibly so young people do not fall through the gaps.

3.3.2 Develop a portable recognition of skills

We support the development of a nationally recognised skills framework to capture and communicate the full range of skills and experiences young people develop, one that focuses on what people can do, not just the name of the course they took.

This should include:

- A skills passport or record that a young person carries with them across jobs, sectors and regions, in language that employers can understand without needing specialist knowledge.
- Alignment with existing frameworks. Apprenticeship standards, vocational qualifications, and Local Skills Improvement Plans already describe skills in some form. The opportunity is to pull these together and make the language clearer and more consistent, rather than creating a new parallel system.
- Employers should be encouraged and supported to use skills-based approaches when recruiting and promoting staff. This might begin with guidance and pilots rather than mandates, but it needs to be clearly signposted as the direction of travel.

3.3.3 Linking vocational pathways to SEND reform

The proposals set out in SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First provide an important opportunity to strengthen post-16 pathways for children and young people with SEND. For many young people with SEND, engagement with practical, applied learning can be a critical route to building confidence, independence and progression into employment.

We would welcome further clarity on how:

- Individual Support Plans (ISPs) will support pathway planning into post-16 education, employment and training, including vocational routes.
- The experts-at-hand model will extend into post-16 settings, including further education and training providers.

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- Transitions at age 16 will be managed to avoid a cliff edge in support, particularly for those moving into vocational or work-based pathways.
 - How colleges will be appropriately funded to accept a wider cohort of children and young people, with additional support to meet the needs of this cohort and widen their offer.

Embedding vocational pathways within SEND reforms would support the wider ambition of creating a system in which all young people, regardless of need, can access meaningful progression routes and achieve sustained outcomes.

What changes if we get this right

A young person who wants to become an electrician, a construction worker or a healthcare assistant would be able to get there through their education without being blocked by a system designed for a different destination. Schools would be recognised and rewarded for supporting young people into meaningful post-16 destinations, not just for their Progress 8 scores. The nearly one million young people currently NEET would reduce over time as better vocational pathways and earlier intervention replace a system that currently has no good mechanism for catching disengagement before it becomes entrenched. And the deep cultural perception that vocational routes are second best would begin to shift, as the system itself starts to treat them as equal.

Conclusion

We strongly support the ambition of the schools white paper to create a system in which every child can achieve and thrive. This ambition will be most fully realised if the reforms are supported by the structures, incentives and shared expectations needed to make inclusion visible, consistent and sustainable.

As set out in this response, this requires aligning accountability with inclusion, establishing a clear and consistent framework for inclusive practice, and recognising the full breadth of pathways through which young people succeed. It also requires ensuring that young people with social, emotional, relational and mental health needs, including those experiencing mental ill health, remain visible and supported within the system.

Taken together, these reforms would support a shift from a system that recognises a narrow definition of success to one that values belonging, participation, progression and a wider range of strengths. By making inclusion visible, strengthening collaboration between schools, trusts, local authorities and wider partners, and embedding vocational and relational approaches alongside academic attainment, the education system can better recognise and support young people whose strengths, needs and aspirations have not always been fully seen.

Without these changes, there is a risk that the schools white paper's ambitions will not reach all of the children and young people they are intended to support. With them, there is an opportunity to create a more equitable, responsive and sustainable system, one that identifies need earlier, supports children more effectively, and enables all young people to move into meaningful and sustained futures.

We would welcome the opportunity to continue working with the Department for Education to ensure these reforms translate into lasting, system-wide change.

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