



# Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education

A response to the open consultation on the White Paper

## ***SEND Reform: putting children and young people first***

*CSIE is a national charity, established in 1982, working to develop more inclusive education for all, especially those with labels of special educational needs and disability (SEND). For 44 years CSIE has provided direct support for inclusive school development, training for educators & pupils, consultancy, and a wide range of resources. Among our many achievements is an international award (Innovative Practice Award 2016) for "Equality: Making It Happen - A guide to help schools ensure everyone is safe, included and learning". For more information please see our short film at [bit.ly/CSIE-film](http://bit.ly/CSIE-film) or visit [www.csie.org.uk](http://www.csie.org.uk).*

CSIE has responded to this consultation through the collective voice of the Special Educational Consortium (SEC). In this additional submission, CSIE wishes to welcome the focus on inclusion and draw specific attention to the following issues.

### **1. Commitment to inclusion in principle**

We welcome the Government's recognition that the current SEND system is failing too many children and young people, frustrating families, exhausting practitioners, and placing unsustainable pressure on public finances. We agree that radical reform is long overdue.

However, inclusive education is not merely about placement. It is about transforming cultures, policies and practices so that education systems and local communities expect and support the presence, participation, achievement, and belonging of all children and young people. These principles are reflected in the Equality Act 2010, in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and in Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, all of which place obligations on government to progressively realise inclusive education.

For too long, inclusion has been regarded as discretionary, aspirational, or conditional. The result has been increasing segregation, rising numbers of children excluded from mainstream schools, growing parental distrust, deteriorating outcomes, and escalating costs. Reform must confront all these systemic issues directly, by investigating and addressing their root causes. Without this, existing difficulties will simply resurface sooner or later.



We also note the conclusions of the Education Committee’s September 2025 report “Solving the SEND crisis”, which set a clear roadmap for change in a way which acknowledges and protects children’s rights. In this report, the Education Committee had clearly stated that children’s legal rights should not be diluted and, instead, accountability must be strengthened to make the system work better. It had also argued for the development of a system in which children and young people with labels of SEND learn alongside their peers in mainstream settings. We strongly support this direction and caution against reforms that weaken legal protections or increase segregation.

## **2. A rights-based vision for reform**

We strongly support the ambition that children and young people should attend their local mainstream school and receive a good education in their local community. This must be a genuine entitlement and, in order to be effective, must involve building capacity in schools to respond to the needs of all learners.

The White Paper correctly identifies the fragmentation and adversarial nature of the current system. Yet the proposed solutions do not consistently address the underlying drivers of exclusion. There remains insufficient attention to the ways in which accountability systems, funding arrangements, curriculum pressures, admissions practices, competition and inspection frameworks continue to act as disincentives for inclusion in mainstream schools.

The SEND crisis is not caused by the presence of disabled children in mainstream schools. It is caused by a system that has failed to equip and support schools to respond effectively to learner diversity.

We therefore urge the government to adopt a clearer national commitment to inclusive education, supported by measurable expectations for all schools and local areas.

## **3. The importance of language**

Language matters. Terms that are poorly defined risk reinforcing within-child deficit thinking and can contribute to lowered expectations, exclusionary practices, and assumptions that some children are inherently unsuitable for mainstream education. We caution strongly against language that shifts attention away from barriers within systems, cultures, policies and practices and, instead, supports stereotypical thinking about within-child deficits or barriers.

We are particularly concerned by proposals that appear to introduce the term “complex” as a new category within the SEND system, without a clear definition or

transparent purpose. The risk that such terminology will undermine inclusion is substantial.

The social model of disability reminds us that “special educational needs” arise from the interaction between a child’s impairment(s) and inaccessible or inflexible systems. Introducing vague new categories such as “complex” risks obscuring this understanding and may unintentionally legitimise greater segregation.

Rather than creating additional categories of perceived difficulty, reform should focus on strengthening schools’ capacity to respond flexibly and effectively to the full diversity of learners. The history of SEND reform demonstrates that attempts to simplify systems often risk excluding those whose needs do not fit neatly within standardised models. Reforms must strengthen, not weaken, children’s rights. We are concerned that proposed national frameworks and standardised approaches may unintentionally undermine person-centred practice and existing legal protections.

#### **4. Person-centred planning and legal entitlements**

We strongly oppose any move towards replacing individually assessed provision with standardised packages of support.

Children and young people are individuals, not categories. Standardised packages risk undermining the personalised, responsive approach that effective inclusion requires. Such an approach also risks weakening existing legal entitlements.

The Children and Families Act 2014 already established important principles of person-centred planning, participation, and coordinated support. The central challenge has not been the absence of legislation, but inconsistent implementation, insufficient resourcing, and the erosion of inclusive practices across the system.

Much though the emphasis seems to be on introducing new legislation, we do not believe that this is the answer. Instead, we believe it would be more effective if efforts to improve the system were to focus on properly implementing existing legal duties, strengthening accountability for inclusion, and restoring the Statutory Guidance on Inclusive Schooling, to provide greater clarity and consistency for schools, local authorities, and families.

While consistency and clarity are important, the diversity of children’s experiences and needs cannot be reduced to rigid thresholds or predetermined categories of support. Families must retain meaningful rights to participation, and independent routes of challenge and redress.

## 5. The need for radical systemic change

The consultation places welcome emphasis on earlier intervention and improved mainstream capacity. However, these ambitions will not be realised without broader structural reform.

An inclusive education system requires:

- sustained investment in mainstream schools;
- accessible buildings and learning environments;
- adequate staffing levels;
- high-quality teacher education;
- protected time for collaboration;
- specialist support services integrated into mainstream provision;
- accountability systems that reward inclusive practice;
- and meaningful participation of disabled children, young people, and families in decision-making.

We particularly support the principle that every teacher is an SEND teacher. Current practice in many schools reflects an over-reliance on Teaching Assistants (TAs) as the main educators for pupils identified as having SEND. While TAs make valuable contributions to school communities, research has consistently shown that replacing teacher input with TA support can unintentionally reduce access to high-quality teaching, peer interaction, and full participation in school life.

We welcome the proposed focus on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continued Professional Development (CPD) and caution against any attempt to draw solely or heavily from the “special education” sector for this. In order to equip all educators with the knowledge, skills and confidence to teach diverse groups of learners well in inclusive classrooms, it seems obvious that the system should draw on the expertise of those who have worked in inclusive classrooms and achieved good outcomes there.

## 6. Inclusion bases and participation

We welcome the expansion of inclusion bases, hubs and resourced provision within mainstream schools. At the same time, we are concerned at the potential misappropriation, if these are utilized as spaces in which some pupils are kept separated from their peers – and how ironic their name might be in such cases!

Any additional provision within mainstream settings must not become a mechanism for routine segregation or reduced access to all aspects of school life. Too often, separate spaces within schools can unintentionally isolate pupils from their peers, limit participation in school life, and reinforce assumptions that some children do not belong in mainstream classrooms.

If inclusion bases are to exist, they should operate as flexible, temporary, and supportive resources that increase participation in mainstream learning and social life rather than replace it. Their purpose should be to enable belonging, collaboration, and access — not separation.

Policy should be guided by existing evidence<sup>1</sup> that the benefits of including disabled children in mainstream schools are twofold: when inclusion is well resourced and implemented, it leads to improved educational outcomes for disabled as well as non-disabled children, and it better supports the social and emotional development of all children, disabled as well as non-disabled.

## **7. The social model of disability**

We encourage the Government to frame reform more consistently through the social model of disability.

Too often, policy language continues to locate “problems” within individual children rather than recognising the barriers created by inflexible systems, environments, and attitudes. Understanding disability as an ordinary part of human diversity is essential if schools are to move beyond deficit thinking and low expectations.

A socially just education system does not ask whether certain children are suitable for mainstream education. Instead, it asks what changes are necessary to ensure all children can participate, belong, and thrive.

## **8. Segregation and equality**

We are concerned by the continued growth of segregated provision and by the assumption that increasing specialist placement is an inevitable or desirable response to current pressures. Even if this is the outcome of parental choice, it has to be remembered that such choices are made in a context in which mainstream schools are often reluctant to include disabled children and young people. In this context, segregation can be seen as the result of persistent systemic underinvestment in inclusion.

Increasing reliance on segregated provision risks undermining equality obligations and limiting opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to learn and grow together in their local communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Alana Institute (2016) A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education. Available at: [https://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A\\_Summary\\_of\\_the\\_evidence\\_on\\_inclusive\\_education.pdf](https://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf)

## **9. Co-production and trust**

Families' loss of trust in the SEND system reflects years of unmet need, conflict, and inconsistency. Trust cannot be rebuilt through administrative reform alone.

Children, young people, parents, Disabled People's Organisations, and inclusive education organisations must be meaningfully involved in shaping both policy and implementation. Co-production must extend beyond consultation and become an ongoing principle of governance and accountability.

## **10. A solid vision**

This consultation presents an opportunity for long overdue reform. Successful reform, however, cannot but depend on clarity of vision.

It is indisputable that a solution to the enduring problems of our education system (poor outcomes, frustrated parents and unsustainable finances) is urgently needed. However, without a clearly evidenced rationale of why these issues continue to arise, any reform is likely to come up against the same problems.

CSIE urges the government to ensure that the final reforms going forward are fuelled by a solid and clearly articulated vision, and backed by careful planning and resources to bring about the culture change needed for widespread support for inclusion across the sector. Ultimately, the reforms must strengthen children's rights, advance disability equality, and build capacity in schools to develop a fully inclusive education system fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, capable of welcoming and benefitting every learner.

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