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*Literature Review*

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## **Potential Impact of the Government SEND Reforms for Neurodivergent Children and Young People**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the potential impact of the UK government’s proposed education reforms on neurodivergent children and young people. Recent white papers outline significant changes to the structure of SEND support in mainstream and specialist education, including a strengthened universal offer, new National Inclusion Standards, and a tiered system of Targeted, Targeted Plus, and EHCP provision. While the reforms promise increased funding and a focus on inclusive practice, concerns have emerged regarding reduced access to personalised support with the introduction of standardised specialist provision packages. There are currently few details of what support will be provided in these packages. The language used suggests a behaviourist and ableist viewpoint, raising questions about how well the reforms will meet neurodivergent pupils’ needs. Additional concerns include inconsistent implementation of inclusion standards; high student-staff ratios and the potential for continued school alienation among neurodivergent learners. Although the reforms aim to improve mainstream inclusivity, this analysis highlights that without meaningful consultation, neurodivergent-affirming evidence, and structural changes within schools, the reforms may inadvertently reduce support and statutory protections for neurodivergent children.

**Keywords:** SEND, neurodivergence, inclusion, education, disability

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## ***Introduction***

The recent publication of two education white papers by the United Kingdom (UK) government has caused a high degree of concern among families of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). These white papers set out the UK government's plans for education reform and the overhaul of the current legislation in place to support children and young people with SEND. There is particular anxiety about how the proposed changes to whom will qualify for the highest levels of support will affect neurodivergent children.

Since the Children and Families Act 2014 replaced Statements of Need with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs), the number of children on these plans has steadily increased, rising from 3.3% in 2015/16 to 5.3% in 2024/25. While the rate of increase is concerning, the percentage of the whole school population with an EHCP remains small (UK Gov, 2026a). The increase has resulted in spending on EHCP provision regularly exceeding funding. Sibieta and Snape (2024) report that between 2018 and 2022 the overspend has consistently been £200 to £800 million over the funding available, a deficit of 2–7% of local authority SEND budgets. This is unsustainable and a clear indication that the current system is not working. Data available from the UK Government (2026a) shows that neurodivergent pupils currently make up approximately 44%\* of those with EHCPs, a figure that is rising. As a result, these reforms are of particular relevance to neurodivergent students and their families.

In response to these concerns and others, the UK government have set out their plans for educational reform in two white papers, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* and *SEND reform: Putting Children and Young People First* (UK gov, 2026b, 2026c). To sit alongside these, the Department for Education (DfE) (2026a–d) have provided some supplementary documents outlining how they envisage some key aspects of the reforms working in practice, as funding to support the move towards more inclusive practices will be available to them from September 2026, ahead of the passing of legislation on the reforms, which should come into force in September 2029 (Roberts, 2026).

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\* It is not possible to give an accurate figure as only autism is counted as a distinct type of SEND; other neurodivergences are included in other categories. ADHD, for example, comes under Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH), which is a broader category including a range of mental health and other conditions. This figure is made up of those children who are on the SEND register for autism and SEMH.

## **Discussion**

### ***Outline of Proposed Reforms***

The main intention behind the reforms appears to be to make the universal offer for all children in mainstream schools more inclusive, allowing a greater proportion of children to thrive in schools without the need for additional support. The government's aim is that, over time, this will reduce the number of children who require an EHCP or are on the SEND register (UK Gov, 2026b, 2026c). The reforms set out an extra £5.3 billion of funding over the next 3 years to support mainstream schools in becoming more inclusive and to provide more specialist provision places, both within mainstream schools and in special schools. The government are also pledging £200 million to provide continual professional development (CPD) training for all teachers to upskill and bolster the confidence of teachers to deliver more inclusive classroom practices. Schools will also be able to spend their additional SEND funding on training (UK Gov, 2026b, DfE 2026d).

For students who need more assistance than the universal offer provides, schools are currently required to make their 'best endeavours' to meet the needs of SEND pupils within school (Education Committee, 2025). Where they cannot do this without additional support, they can apply for an EHCP, which is a statutory document drawn up by the local authority with input from professionals, the school, the child and their family. The plan is individual to the pupil and provides extra funding for schools and access to outside support (Education Committee, 2025). Under the proposed reforms, all SEND students will have an individual support plan that sets out the provisions required. This will fit into one of three categories: Targeted, Targeted Plus and EHCPs. Those in the Targeted category will be provided with extra support within the school. Targeted Plus provision will include access to in-school inclusion bases as well as additional support from 'Experts at Hand', education and health professionals such as educational psychologists, and speech and language therapists employed by local authorities. The Government is pledging an additional £1.8 billion over three years to local authorities to fund this. Pupils who need more specialist or one-to-one support will still be able to apply for an EHCP, but under the reforms, this will take the form of access to provisions set out within a limited number of standardised specialist support packages rather than a bespoke set of supports linked to their specific needs. The vision is that post-reform, EHCPs will only be required for those pupils with the most complex needs (UK Gov, 2026c).

### ***Potential Effects of the Reforms***

If the reforms in the white paper are implemented, the current highly individualised approach to drawing up EHCPs will be replaced by several standardised specialist provision packages, which will form the

basis of the new plans. Students who qualify for this extra support will be granted one of these packages and will have access to all the provisions within it (UK Gov, 2026c). At present, there is little detail in the white papers about how many specialist provision packages there will be, what they will focus on and how much scope there will be for personalisation within them. This has created a degree of concern amongst parents of SEND children and organisations supporting them. A further Department for Education (DfE) document (2026a) outlines a little more information on what is envisioned for specialist provision packages. Unfortunately, there are few concrete details of the support they will provide, and the language used indicates a behaviourist and ableist viewpoint. This is particularly concerning for neurodivergent students, as it can lead to a focus on the observable behaviours, and how they impact others, rather than the person themselves and their unmet needs, which are the cause of those behaviours (Goodall et al, 2022; Ryan, Watchorn and Evans, 2024). This is an unfortunate common occurrence even in those working with disabled people (Friedman, Van Puymbrouck and Gordon, 2024).

At first reading, the spirit of the reforms seems to be one of inclusion, with the focus on improving the universal offer by using evidence-based pedagogy to develop National Inclusion Standards to inform best practice and offer guidance on how schools can improve their accessibility for the most commonly found SEND needs, including neurodivergent conditions (UK Gov, 2026b). The success of the proposed reforms depends on schools applying the National Inclusion Standards equally and consistently. Before December 2025, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) did not specifically assess schools on inclusion (National Governance Association, 2025). Since December 2025, OFSTED have graded schools on inclusion; at the time of writing, 11% of schools assessed (99 out of 928) were found to have inclusion practices that were below expected standards. This data was calculated by collating the grading for inclusion for the 928 reports published between 1st December 2025 and 6th May 2026 for government-funded mainstream schools. The number of schools falling below the required standard for inclusion needs to be monitored, especially once the National Standards for Inclusion come into force. There also needs to be careful thought given to what accountability measures there will be for schools who fail to meet the required standard for inclusion as well as the procedures put in place for parents to seek help if their child's needs are not met by a school but they fall below the threshold for being granted an EHCP.

There is a range of pressures on schools and teachers that may impact their ability to meet inclusivity standards, examples of this are school league tables and performance-related pay. The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) has indicated that when schools are encouraged to focus on improving their position in league tables, it can take focus away from providing a quality education (ACCA, 2026). This view is supported by The Sutton Trust (2026), which reported that 41% of school leaders who responded to their survey believe that some schools actively discourage

applications from SEND pupils. The report goes on to say that the top schools for attainment have up to 50% fewer disadvantaged pupils with SEND than the average comprehensive. Staff at these schools rebut this, stating that it is not down to their SEND status, that they are discouraged, but rather due to the lack of funding (Phillips, 2026), as the largest SEND group, neurodivergent students are likely to be the ones most affected by this trend.

Although more funding has been promised, it comes with an increased level of scrutiny on inclusion and additional responsibilities for schools, through the National Inclusions Standards. The government has committed to using evidence-backed research and expert advice to inform the National Inclusion Standards and the specialist provision packages. This commitment is positive, but with little information as to where this will be sourced, there is cause for concern. Victor-Aigbodion and Eseadi (2024) found that most research into the experience of neurodivergent students in schools was written from the perspective of teachers, with little from the point of view of the students. Neurodivergent students' experience of school can be vastly different from that of their neurotypical peers and put them at higher risk of experiencing school alienation (Fisher et al., 2025). If the evidence used to formulate the details of these reforms does not include research on the lived experience of neurodivergent students and seek advice from neurodivergent professionals, then it is conceivable that the risks of school alienation will not improve. School alienation is often a result of not feeling seen, heard or valued by teachers and peers (Mirfin-Veitch, Jalota and Schmidt, 2020). Feeling alienated from both academic and social experiences in school can lead to higher levels of dysregulation for students, resulting in expressions of boredom, truancy or hostility to teachers or peers (Hascher and Hadjar, 2018). There is already a tendency for some education professionals to adopt a behaviourist viewpoint of neurodivergent students, which can lead to unhelpful attitudes and barriers to affective support (Ryan, Watchorn and Evans, 2024). Without careful implementation, these reforms may not reduce this.

### ***Potential Challenges to the Success of the Reforms***

The general environment within mainstream classrooms and the expectations put upon neurodivergent students can often lead to dysregulation. Large class sizes and hard surfaces increase noise levels and create social and sensory challenges which can be difficult for busy teachers to mitigate (Mirfin-Veitch, Jalota and Schmidt, 2018). It would take changes at a governmental level to address staff-to-student ratios or reduce class sizes. Student-to-staff ratios in the UK are the 5<sup>th</sup> highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, at 19:1 in primary schools and 17:1 in lower secondary schools (OECD, 2024). However, there is no focus on reducing ratios or class sizes in the white papers. Goodall et al. (2022) highlight that sensory dysregulation caused by the classroom environment can be helped by students having access to sensory rooms, something mentioned as best practice in both white

papers (UK Gov, 2026b & c). Access to sensory rooms does not promote inclusivity; while they are beneficial to students with sensory sensitivities, they require students to leave the classroom to access them, resulting in a loss of learning. In order to improve inclusivity, the conditions within the classroom that cause the dysregulation in the first place need to be addressed.

The overarching tone of the reforms focuses on making all schools more inclusive and accessible. The increase in funding going directly to schools and to local authorities to provide more specialist support alongside inclusivity training for all teachers should aid this. The proposal for evidence-based inclusion standards, highlighting the most common support needs, especially if sourced from neurodivergent-affirming sources, has the potential to benefit neurodivergent pupils by increasing knowledge of their challenges and the types of support that might help.

There is a lot to give hope in the reforms, but there is also a lot to cause concern, primarily due to the lack of details in both the white papers and the supporting documents. There is still a prevailing ableist and behaviourist view of the challenges experienced by neurodivergent students. Building truly inclusive classrooms is a big challenge made harder by high student-to-staff ratios, which are not addressed in the reforms. In order to be more inclusive, already busy teachers will need to understand the underlying cause of any challenges their students have; without this, it can impact their ability to help. The use of sensory rooms and support bases to help students regulate removes students from lessons, which may in turn affect their progress. The changes proposed to those who will qualify for an EHCP and the form that they will take are extremely concerning for families of neurodivergent children. It is important to note that white papers are not final policy documents; there will be a period of consultation before the required legislation is written, and there will probably be further changes as any resulting bill passes through parliament.

## ***Conclusion***

Overall, the proposed reforms set out some positive steps but rely on already overstretched school staff to make classrooms more inclusive and on schools as a whole to adhere to the National Inclusion Standards. At present, the statutory support set out in EHCPs gives neurodivergent students and their families a safety net if schools are not meeting their needs. If, as is suggested, EHCPs become less personalised under these reforms and fewer children can qualify, a significant proportion of neurodivergent children are likely to be affected. A lot will depend on the results of the consultation on the white papers and the evidence base used to formulate the specialist provision packages and the National Inclusion Standards, but at present, there is reason to be concerned that these reforms will remove support and rights from neurodivergent children.

### ***Background of the Author***

The author is currently an occupational therapy student and is neurodivergent with two school-age neurodivergent children. They also taught in secondary schools for 12 years and are currently a school governor.

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