



Department  
for Education



Policy Insights Unit

# **SEN units and resourced provision**

## **Insights from expert interviews**

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## About this report

This report was produced by HM Government's Policy Insights Unit (PIU). The PIU is an in-house consultancy, supporting teams across government by working with experts to develop analysis and ideas for policy. We partner with four UK universities – Brunel, Lancaster, Surrey, and York – but we work with academics and industry experts worldwide.

This research was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to gather insights from academic experts on the impact of Special Educational Needs (SEN) units and resourced provision<sup>1</sup> on pupils, parents, and schools, the features of an effective unit, and the wider conditions needed for their success. This work complements ongoing analysis and research by the Department on SEN units and resourced provision.

Throughout the report, we use the term 'SEND units' to refer collectively to both SEN units and resourced provision. This includes provisions funded by the local authority and individual settings.

Insights in this report are based on semi-structured interviews with 15 experts from academia and the third sector, which took place between December 2025 and February 2026 (see Annex A), as well as a review of academic literature to assess available evidence and stakeholder perspectives. The report covers:

- **Impacts of SEN units and resourced provision** on pupils, parents, and schools
- **Features of an effective SEN unit and resourced provision** and wider conditions for success
- **Opportunity areas** for DfE for future work

If you would like to get in touch with us about this report or our work, please email us at [enquiries@policyinsightsunit.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@policyinsightsunit.gov.uk).

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<sup>1</sup> As set out in the Schools White Paper, 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving', the term 'inclusion bases' replaces the current terms SEN unit, resourced provision, and pupil support unit (sometimes referred to by schools as 'internal or in-school alternative provision'), as well as incorporating settings' own SEN units. Inclusion bases are underpinned by two models: 1) Support bases: Commissioned and funded by individual settings and academy trusts; and 2) Specialist bases: Commissioned and funded by the local authority.

## Executive summary

**The Government has recently set out an ambition to increase the number of ‘Inclusion Bases’,<sup>2</sup> formerly known as SEN units and resourced provisions, in mainstream schools.** This is intended to provide more children and young people with bespoke learning environments, equipment, and expertise to meet their needs, bridging the current gap between mainstream and specialist schools.

**There are now over 1,600 schools in England with a SEN unit or resourced provision,<sup>3</sup> but the evidence base on their impacts is very limited.** Experts noted that methodological and ethical constraints can limit the types of studies that can be conducted in these settings and it can be difficult to isolate the specific contribution of SEN units and resourced provision to pupil outcomes.

**We are only aware of one published study in England that has measured pupil outcomes in SEN units and resourced provision, focused solely on autistic pupils.** This indicated that, compared to mainstream schools without such provision, specialist autism provision is associated with greater academic progress, a stronger sense of belonging, and improved attendance for autistic pupils.<sup>4</sup> There is also strong evidence for the use of small-group, specialist interventions in improving educational outcomes for pupils with SEND, but this evidence does not directly assess the effectiveness of SEN units and resourced provisions as a delivery model.

**Some small-scale qualitative studies point to broadly positive perceptions of SEN units and resourced provision among parents, teachers, and pupils.<sup>5</sup>** SEN units and resourced provision can provide a better understanding of pupil needs and more

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<sup>2</sup> Department for Education, [‘Every child achieving and thriving’](#) (2026). See introduction for more detail on the new terminology.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [‘Special educational needs in England \(Dataset\)’](#) (2025) [accessed 10 April 2026].

<sup>4</sup> Cook, A., & Boddy, A., [‘The impact of specialist resource centres on autistic pupils’ experience of mainstream school’](#), Autism (2026).

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay, G. et al, [‘Meeting the educational and social needs of children with language impairment or autism spectrum disorder: the parents’ perspectives’](#), International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders (2016); Hebron, J. & Bond, C., [‘Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: parent and pupil perceptions’](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2017); Landor, F. & Perepa, P., [‘Do resource bases enable social inclusion of students with Asperger syndrome in a mainstream secondary school?’](#), Support for Learning (2017); Strogilos, V. & Ward, R., [‘Resourced provision in mainstream schools for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities: Inclusive service or safe space?’](#), Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs (2023); Bond, C. & Hebron, J., [‘Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: staff perceptions and satisfaction’](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2016); Warren, A. et al., [‘Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers’](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2021); Jalkhi, A. & Rowley, J., [‘There is no barrier when it comes to your deafness’: participatory research exploring the views of deaf and hard-of-hearing students being educated in a resource provision’](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2025).

responsive support. Experts suggested this provision can also contribute positively to wider inclusive practice across the school, enhancing the school's capacity and expertise to meet the needs of pupils with SEN.

**Experts cautioned that the effectiveness of SEN units and resourced provision is highly dependent upon whether key features of strong provision are in place,** particularly opportunities for meaningful inclusion within the mainstream school, and access to specialist staff and sensory spaces. Provision should support pupils' access to the curriculum through tailored adaptations and more intensive, specialist support where needed. Effective SEN units and resourced provision also proactively communicate with parents on pupil need and progress.

**The success of SEN units and resourced provision is also shaped by wider system- or school-wide factors.** Most importantly, school leadership plays a vital role in how SEN units and resourced provision are perceived and integrated within the mainstream school. Other conditions for success include robust staff training, staff retention, and effective collaboration between local authorities and schools on placement allocations.

**The Department for Education can strengthen the implementation and effectiveness of SEN units and resourced provision by developing guidance, improving data collection, and supporting staff training.** Guidance could include detail on terminology, overarching principles, and expectations for how SEN units and resourced provision operate in practice. DfE could also help improve the evidence base by investing in robust research on the impacts and effectiveness of SEN units and resourced provision.

# Introduction

## What are SEN units and resourced provision?

The Government recently published its Schools White Paper and consultation on Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reform,<sup>6</sup> setting out commitments to integrate the SEND system within the mainstream system. A central part of this ambition is to expand specialist provision within mainstream settings, increasing the number of ‘inclusion bases’. The term ‘inclusion bases’ replaces the terms SEN unit, resourced provision, and pupil support unit (sometimes referred to by schools as ‘internal or in-school alternative provision’). It also encompasses settings’ own SEN units. Inclusion bases will be underpinned by two models:<sup>7</sup>

- **Support bases**, commissioned and funded by individual settings or academy trusts to deliver targeted support; and
- **Specialist bases**, commissioned and funded by the local authority to deliver specialist support.

To support this work, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned the Policy Insights Unit (PIU) to gather expert insights on the effectiveness of specialist provision within mainstream settings. PIU’s research was carried out between November 2025 and February 2026, and therefore refers to the previous terminology of SEN units and resourced provision. These are defined as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- **SEN units** are specialist provisions within a mainstream school where pupils with SEN are taught within separate classes for at least half of their time.
- **Resourced provision** are places reserved in a mainstream school for pupils with a specific type of SEN, providing a base and specialist facilities. Pupils are taught for at least half of their time within mainstream classes.

Both SEN units and resourced provision tend to support pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), but can also support pupils without a plan in place.

**Throughout this report, we use the term ‘SEND units’ to refer collectively to both SEN units and resourced provision.**

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<sup>6</sup> Department for Education, [‘Every child achieving and thriving’](#) (2026); Department for Education, [‘SEND reform: putting children and young people first’](#) (2026) [accessed 10 April 2026].

<sup>7</sup> Department for Education, [‘SEND reform: Putting children and young people first’](#) (2026).

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education, [‘Special educational needs in England \(Dataset\)’](#) (2025) [accessed 10 April 2026].

## How many are there, and what do they deliver?

The proportion of pupils with special educational needs has increased in primary and secondary school settings. Current figures suggest over 1.7 million pupils have special educational needs.<sup>9</sup>

The distribution of SEND units, like the distribution of SEN need,<sup>10</sup> is uneven across the country. As of January 2025, there are 449 schools in England with SEN units (up from 392 in 2024) and 1,217 schools with a resourced provision.<sup>11</sup> Some schools also fund their own specialist support to meet specific needs. DfE survey data suggests this may be relatively common, with 25% of primary and 27% of secondary schools reporting that they run their 'own unit / provision not formally recognised by the local authority'.<sup>12</sup> Some schools also operate in-school behaviour units, which may also provide SEND support.<sup>13</sup> These provisions are not captured by official data.

SEND units can vary considerably in design, purpose, and practice. For example, schools may set different expectations for how much time pupils spend in SEND units versus mainstream classrooms.

Despite these differences, SEND units typically share a common purpose: to strengthen inclusion by combining opportunities for meaningful participation in mainstream settings with specialist environments that support pupils to engage, progress, and succeed. At their best, experts observed, these provisions equip pupils with the skills, confidence, and support needed to thrive both within the base and the wider school community, while ensuring continued access to the national curriculum.

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<sup>9</sup> Department for Education, '[Special educational needs in England \(Dataset\)](#)' (2025) [accessed 10 April 2026].

<sup>10</sup> Tang, S. et al., '[High-SEND schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research (2025).

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education, '[Special educational needs in England \(Dataset\)](#)' (2025) [accessed 10 April 2026].

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education, '[School and college voice: April 2025](#)' (2025).

<sup>13</sup> Department for Education, '[School and college voice: February 2025](#)' (2025). Surveys with school leaders found that of the 22% of primary and 68% of secondary schools who operated an in-house behaviour unit, 88% of primary schools and 42% of secondary schools offered SEND support in this provision.

## Impact of SEND units

This section sets out evidence from research and expert interviews on the impact of SEND units on pupil outcomes, as well as perceptions of SEND units among pupils, parents, and school staff.

### Strength of evidence

The evidence base on SEND units is very limited and mostly consists of small-scale qualitative studies on stakeholder perceptions. Only one larger scale longitudinal study was identified that examined the impacts of SEND units on measurable pupil outcomes, including academic progress, with the findings relating only to autistic pupils.<sup>14</sup>

Complementary qualitative analyses from the same study drew on autistic pupils', parents', and staff perspectives to help contextualise the quantitative findings.<sup>15</sup> Evidence on pupil impacts and perceptions of SEND units are considered separately below.

Experts noted that methodological and ethical constraints can limit the types of studies that can be conducted. For instance, experimental designs are difficult to implement due to ethical and practical barriers to randomly assigning pupils to different types of educational provision. Research must instead rely on observational study designs, which can be affected by pre-existing differences between pupil groups and difficulties in isolating the specific contribution of SEND units to pupil outcomes. The research base may also be skewed towards stronger examples of provision, as schools with less effective practice may be less likely to participate in research.

“The research on SEN units and resourced provision is very limited in the UK and internationally. Some qualitative studies point to positive perceptions among parents, teachers, and students, but there are many gaps in our knowledge as to how these facilities function and the quality of education they provide.”

**Vasilis Strogilos, University of Southampton**

### Evidence of pupil impacts

Assessing the impacts of SEND units is challenging and depends on how ‘impact’ or ‘effectiveness’ are defined and measured. Outcomes are multi-faceted and cannot be easily captured through simple measures. Here we explore evidence on attainment, attendance, and wellbeing.

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<sup>14</sup> Cook, A., & Boddy, A., [‘The impact of specialist resource centres on autistic pupils’ experience of mainstream school’](#), *Autism* (2026).

<sup>15</sup> Boddy, A. & Cook, A., [‘Specialist Resource Centres as protective microsystems: A qualitative comparative case study of autistic pupils’ experiences in mainstream secondary schools’](#), [Preprint] (2026).

A recent longitudinal study examined the impact of specialist resource centres (SRCs), akin to a SEN unit or resourced provision, for autistic pupils within mainstream schools.<sup>16</sup> The study included over 100 autistic pupils across seven secondary schools and compared three types of provision: placement in an SRC, mainstream placement in a school that hosted an SRC, and placement in a mainstream school without an SRC.

Based on teacher-reported progress data for core subjects (English, Maths and Science) over two years, the study found that autistic pupils in schools with SRCs made the greatest progress on average. Pupils in schools without SRCs showed a decline in progress. Within schools that had SRCs, autistic pupils without an SRC placement made the most progress, followed by those with an SRC placement. This pattern suggests that SRCs might have a positive impact on inclusive teaching across the school. However, differences in pupil characteristics, such as co-occurring conditions or additional needs among pupils placed in SRCs, may also partly account for the more modest progress among these pupils compared to autistic pupils with mainstream placements in SRC host schools.

The study did not find that placement type impacted pupil psychological wellbeing or social inclusion. However, pupil perceptions of peer support and, to a lesser extent, teacher support, were the strongest predictors of positive psychosocial outcomes across all placement types. This reinforces the importance of peer acceptance and supportive classroom climates for autistic pupils' mental health. Qualitative evidence from the study<sup>17</sup> suggested that these relational factors are shaped by the presence of trusted adults, consistent staffing, and a shared, school-wide understanding of need.

Based on anecdotal evidence, experts suggested that a sense of belonging is an important outcome for pupils with SEND and is likely to underpin other important outcomes such as confidence, engagement, and academic outcomes. The study on SRC placements above found some evidence that placement in SRCs is associated with a stronger sense of school belonging and better attendance among autistic pupils, compared to schools without an SRC. The qualitative study provided insight into how this sense of belonging is generated, highlighting the role of SEND units as 'protective spaces' within mainstream schools that offer predictable environments, reduced sensory demands, and socially safe opportunities to seek support. These features appear to support emotional regulation and gradual participation in mainstream contexts, although experiences remain variable and are shaped by wider systemic constraints such as staffing, resource availability, and access to external services.

Although it does not directly shed light on the impact of SEND units as models for delivery, other high-quality evidence provides indirect support for the types of approaches often used in SEND units, particularly structured, small-group, and specialist interventions. For

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<sup>16</sup> Cook, A., & Boddy, A., '[The impact of specialist resource centres on autistic pupils' experience of mainstream school](#)', *Autism* (2026).

<sup>17</sup> Boddy, A. & Cook, A., '[Specialist Resource Centres as protective microsystems: A qualitative comparative case study of autistic pupils' experiences in mainstream secondary schools](#)', [Preprint] (2026).

instance, meta-analytic evidence suggests that targeted interventions can raise educational outcomes for pupils with SEND, with an average of around five months' additional progress compared to usual teaching.<sup>18</sup> For reading specifically, findings from a large-scale randomised controlled trial<sup>19</sup> suggest that reading comprehension interventions are most effective when delivered in small, targeted groups for pupils with specific difficulties, rather than at the whole-class level.

## Perceptions of SEND units

### Parents' perceptions

Parents of pupils attending SEND units have generally positive views of them.<sup>20</sup> By combining specialist support with continued access to mainstream education, they are often viewed as having the potential to provide 'the best of both worlds'.

Parents report valuing the specialist understanding of pupil needs, positive staff attitudes and expertise, flexible and responsive support, and safe environments that can support social development. However, there are sometimes concerns about inconsistent quality of provision, variation in staff expertise and training, and limited inclusion of pupils in mainstream activities. Studies have focused predominantly on parents of pupils with autism spectrum disorder.

Emerging findings from recent research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER),<sup>21</sup> which involved surveys with 800 SEN coordinators (SENCOs) and school leaders, suggest that among schools who report having a SEND unit, around two thirds state that it makes the school more attractive to parents of pupils with EHCPs.

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<sup>18</sup> Van Herwegen, J. et al., '[Raising educational outcomes for students with special educational needs and disabilities: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#)', Review of Education (2026).

<sup>19</sup> O'Hare, L. et al., '[Comparing the effectiveness of two reciprocal reading comprehension interventions for primary school pupils in disadvantaged schools](#)', British Journal of Educational Psychology (2023).

<sup>20</sup> Lindsay, G. et al., '[Meeting the educational and social needs of children with language impairment or autism spectrum disorder: the parents' perspectives](#)', International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders (2016); Hebron, J. & Bond, C., '[Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: parent and pupil perceptions](#)', European Journal of Special Needs Education (2017); Landor, F. & Perepa, P., '[Do resource bases enable social inclusion of students with Asperger syndrome in a mainstream secondary school?](#)', Support for Learning (2017); Strogilos, V. & Ward, R., '[Resourced provision in mainstream schools for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities: Inclusive service or safe space?](#)', Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs (2023).

<sup>21</sup> The full study is due to be published later this year. An initial summary of the research is outlined here: Tang, S. & Walker, M., '[Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis?](#)', National Foundation for Educational Research blog post (2026) [accessed 24 March 2026].

## Pupil perceptions

SEND units with an autism specialism are generally perceived positively by pupils placed in these units, based on evidence from a small number of pupils involved in qualitative studies.<sup>22</sup> Pupils report feeling better understood, valuing the smaller class sizes, structure and routine, and opportunities to make new friends within the unit and build stronger relationships with trusted adults. However, parts of the day spent in the mainstream environment can be more challenging for pupils, especially when noise levels are high.

Pupils placed in a resourced provision for deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils have reported mixed experiences,<sup>23</sup> valuing access to deaf-aware specialist staff who promote feelings of inclusion, and the availability of quieter spaces that support focus. However, they also highlighted challenges in the mainstream environment, including limited deaf awareness among teachers and peers, and concerns about being seen as different.

## Schools' perceptions

Research exploring staff perceptions of SEND units has found generally positive views among teaching staff,<sup>24</sup> due to their potential for supporting inclusion in mainstream schools, enabling more individualised support for pupils, and contributing to wider school improvements such as increased staff expertise. However, staff also identified challenges, including managing increasingly complex pupil needs and ensuring effective collaboration between SEND unit staff and mainstream teachers.

Emerging findings from the NFER research<sup>25</sup> suggest a mixed picture on the perceived impacts of SEND units and other kinds of specialised units in schools. Hosting a unit can create a positive 'ripple effect', with around two thirds of schools, which report having a SEND unit, agreeing that their provision enhanced their overall capacity and expertise to support a wide range of pupils with SEND. However, schools with these units also shared a number of challenges:

- Over a third of schools reported weak joint working between SEND unit staff and mainstream teachers.

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<sup>22</sup> Warren, A. et al., ['Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers'](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2021); Hebron, J. & Bond, C., ['Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: parent and pupil perceptions'](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2016).

<sup>23</sup> Jalkhi, A. & Rowley, J., ['There is no barrier when it comes to your deafness': participatory research exploring the views of deaf and hard-of-hearing students being educated in a resource provision'](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2024).

<sup>24</sup> Bond, C. & Hebron, J., ['Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: staff perceptions and satisfaction: European Journal of Special Needs Education'](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2015); Warren, A. et al, ['Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers'](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2021).

<sup>25</sup> Tang, S. & Walker, M., ['Can inclusion bases provide part of the solution to the SEND crisis?'](#), National Foundation for Educational Research blog post (2026) [accessed 24 March 2026].

- Over two-thirds reported that the SEND unit placed considerable pressure on school resources or staffing, and fewer than half felt they had sufficient specialist expertise to meet pupils' needs.
- Only a third of secondary schools and fewer than half of primary schools said they felt their SEND unit could meet the needs of all pupils who accessed it.

## Features of an effective SEND unit

This section explores aspects of SEND units that contribute to their effective running.

### Clear purpose, expectations, and intended outcomes

Experts emphasised the need for SEND units to have a well-defined purpose with clarity around the type of needs the SEND unit will support, how the SEND unit will run in practice, and how transitions to mainstream will be managed.

This purpose should be clearly defined before the SEND unit is established to inform the design of the unit and ensure staff with the right expertise are deployed to meet pupil needs effectively.

Processes to manage transitions between the SEND unit and mainstream were viewed as especially important to establish early on, particularly to ensure pupils are not moving abruptly between the SEND unit and mainstream classroom. Schools should continually monitor pupils' needs, adjusting their mainstream engagement accordingly. This was seen as a flexible way to support pupils' confidence and independence over time.

“SEN units and resourced provision are a bridge, not a silo. They should be viewed as a supportive base, rather than a permanent alternative, with flexible, carefully planned pathways to support pupils' meaningful participation in the wider school community.”

**Anna Cook, University of Surrey**

### Opportunity for meaningful inclusion within mainstream

Facilitating meaningful inclusion within the mainstream school was consistently cited by experts as a vital feature of effective and inclusive SEND units. While there was no clear consensus on the proportion of time pupils should spend in each setting, experts agreed that collaboration between the wider school and SEND unit should be deliberate and sustained. In practice, this could include:

- **Regular contact between mainstream and SEND unit staff**, including regular visits to the SEND unit by mainstream staff, joint planning and collaboration around pupil need and progress, and sharing of expertise. Responsibilities between staff in each setting should not feel separate.
- **Consistent pedagogical approaches and strategies** across both the SEND unit and mainstream classrooms to support how pupils learn and access the curriculum.
- **Intentional timetabling**, allowing pupils to transition between mainstream and the SEND unit with minimal disruption.

- **Opportunities for social inclusion** for pupils in SEND units, such as shared school arrival and break times, school trips, and enrichment or extra-curricular activities.
- **Housing the SEND unit within the mainstream school, where feasible.** This can support easy student access to mainstream classes and facilities (such as science labs and sports centres), reducing stigma and reinforcing a sense of belonging.

## Appropriate physical and sensory environment

Experts pointed to several aspects of a SEND unit's physical and sensory environment that support pupils' learning, wellbeing, and sense of safety. These include:

- **Tailoring provision to meet specific needs of the pupil cohort**, such as suitable acoustics for deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils.
- **Familiar, predictable classrooms for learning**, ideally with small class sizes.
- **Sensory-friendly or low-stimulation spaces for respite** where pupils can self-regulate. This could include quiet rooms with bean bags, dim lighting, black-out blinds, dark coloured walls, sound-reducing floor or wall coverings, and frostings on windows to maintain dignity and comfort. Some schools also provide separate spaces for eating, particularly as some pupils may find the school canteen overwhelming, due to noise, crowds, or smell.
- **Private toilet facilities where possible.** Some experts noted that shared toilets can be a source of significant anxiety for some pupils.
- **Outdoor spaces** to support self-regulation. Examples from schools include spaces for gardening and sports, and access to animals.

## Effective teaching with tailored curriculum adaptations

In addition to a supportive sensory environment, SEND units can support pupil learning through tailored adaptations, and trusted relationships with specialist staff and teachers.<sup>26</sup> Effective teaching is underpinned by:

- **Strong relational practice**, with processes in place to continually assess and understand pupil needs over time. This can support teachers anticipate pupil needs and put in place early interventions. Having a consistent teacher in the SEND unit can support this, alongside small class sizes.

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<sup>26</sup> Cullen, M.A. et al., '[Special educational needs in mainstream schools: Evidence review](#)', Education Endowment Foundation (2020).

- **Clear provision mapping**, ensuring pupil needs are met through appropriate adaptations and interventions.
- **Staff who have a robust understanding of disability and neurodiversity**, with specialist expertise and training where relevant.
- **Time to jointly plan** with mainstream class teachers, SENCOs, and learning support assistants. Experts noted that joint planning between SEND unit and mainstream staff is often a significant challenge for schools.<sup>27</sup>
- **Strong understanding of teaching strategies** to adapt the curriculum to meet pupil needs, while maintaining high and appropriate expectations for pupils.

“It’s very important for teachers in mainstream and the SEN unit or resourced provision to regularly coordinate. Strategies that are being used in the specialist provision for individual pupils, such as specific adaptations and approaches, should follow through to mainstream and vice versa.”

**Brian Lamb, University of Derby**

## Access to specialist staff and resources

Experts highlighted the importance of timely access to specialist staff to enable SEND units to meet pupils’ needs effectively. This includes access to speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, and mental health support teams. Limited or delayed access to specialist professionals was frequently cited as a barrier to pupil progress, placing additional burdens on staff to meet increasingly complex needs. Some experts flagged that any expansion of SEND units should be accompanied by sufficient specialist workforce capacity.

## Regular interaction with parents

Respectful and proactive communication with parents was raised as an important aspect of effective SEND units. In practice, this could include keeping parents informed about how much time their child is spending in the SEND unit versus mainstream, as well as communicating promptly about any incidents or emerging concerns to help ensure support is coordinated between school and home. Parents can also help school staff to better understand pupils’ needs and concerns.

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<sup>27</sup> Warren, A. et al., [‘Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers’](#), European Journal of Special Needs Education (2021).

## Wider conditions for success

The effectiveness of these features is dependent upon a number of system- and school-wide factors. These include:

- **School leadership and whole-school culture.** Leadership was consistently viewed as central to establishing SEND units as an active and valued part of the school, fostering a culture of acceptance and belonging, and setting expectations around mainstream inclusion. School leadership can also ensure inclusive practices are adopted across the entire school, such as normalising adjustments for students and learning about neurodiversity or disabilities in lessons, for example in Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education. Some experts felt it was important for school leaders to recognise how labour-intensive SEND units can be, and to therefore set appropriate responsibilities for staff accordingly and appoint heads of SEND units with relevant training.
- **Staff training and development.** Initial and ongoing teacher training was seen as important to build staff confidence and capability, both within a SEND unit and across the wider school. This could include training on SEND, as well as evidence-based pedagogical practices and practical strategies, such as sensory adjustments and regulation breaks.
- **Staff capacity and retention.** Reducing the high turnover of teaching, specialist, and support staff, as far as possible, can help support students' sense of relational safety and consistency of learning.
- **Location of provision.** Experts noted that the locations of SEND units can impact effectiveness, particularly for students who travel long distances to attend a school with appropriate provision. These long journeys risk undermining the benefits pupils may find from attending a SEND unit as the travel time may be dysregulating for some and increase fatigue and anxiety.
- **Effective transition planning.** The transition from primary to secondary school was described as a key pressure point for some students.<sup>28</sup> Experts suggested primary school pupils in SEND units commonly transfer to specialist schools or to SEND units in secondary schools,<sup>29</sup> depending on their need and the type of provision available. Managing this transition well was seen as important to ensure continuity of support and to minimise disruption to pupil learning. Primary schools can support this transition by identifying pupil needs early, and putting in place EHCPs where needed. Experts recommended primary schools arrange visits to the SEND unit in secondary schools to provide pupils with time to familiarise

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<sup>28</sup> Hoy, K. et al., '[Inclusive school practices supporting the primary to secondary transition for autistic children: Pupil, teacher, and parental perspectives](#)', *Advances in Autism* (2018).

<sup>29</sup> Thomson, D., '[Where do we need more provision for pupils with EHC plans?](#)', FFT Education Datalab post (2025) [accessed 25 March 2026].

themselves with their new setting. Schools should also be open with one another, and parents, on what their SEND unit can and cannot offer.

- **Local authority support and admissions processes.** Effective collaboration between local authorities and schools helps ensure placements are timely, appropriate, and based upon a clear understanding of the nature and capacity of provision. Some experts cautioned against ‘crisis-driven placements’, where placements are made late, rather than through early and planned intervention.
- **Appropriate accountability structures.** Some interviewees suggested that wider accountability measures should encourage schools to admit and meet the needs of pupils with SEND, recognising the importance of sustained inclusive practice.<sup>30</sup>

## Measuring success

Experts shared several suggestions for how schools could assess the effectiveness of their SEND units. From a pupil perspective, this could include measuring attainment, attendance, wellbeing, pupils’ sense of belonging within the wider school, and parents’ views on the support their child receives.

More widely, schools could also assess how effectively the provision provides access to appropriate specialist resources, the quality of teaching and SEND unit leadership, and teacher confidence and motivation.

Experts agreed that inclusion is an important outcome but offered different views on how it should be measured and understood in relation to SEND units. Some emphasised the importance of assessing integration within the mainstream school, including how much time pupils spend in mainstream classrooms, whether this changes over time, and the extent to which pupils are able to access and engage with the curriculum when they are there. Others suggested that inclusion should be understood in terms of meaningful engagement and access to learning for pupils that enables them to reach their full potential. From this perspective, some pupils may be better supported by time spent in the SEND unit, where teaching can be more closely aligned with individual needs, rather than prioritising more mainstream classroom time.

Systematic and regular progress reviews, supported by clear measures of success, should also serve the purpose of deciding whether the SEND unit remains appropriate for pupils or whether they are ready to transition out of it. Otherwise, placements risk becoming fixed, rather than functioning as part of a pathway towards progression and possibly reintegration into mainstream classrooms.

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<sup>30</sup> O’Regan, C. et al., [‘Selective inclusion: The interplay of SEND and disadvantage in school admissions’](#), The Sutton Trust (2026).

## Opportunity areas for DfE

This section highlights five key opportunity areas where DfE could help strengthen the implementation, consistency, and effectiveness of SEND units.

### Addressing evidence gaps

DfE could help improve the evidence base by supporting more robust, large-scale, and longitudinal research on SEND units, including studies that cover a wider range of SEND needs and include a representative mix of SEND unit types.

Future research could benefit from clearer and more consistent approaches to measuring outcomes, including academic progress, wellbeing and inclusion, as well as more targeted approaches to try to identify which elements of SEND units drive positive outcomes for pupils.

### Clarifying purpose, principles and definitions

DfE could set out overarching principles to support schools to articulate the purpose of SEND units. This could include value-based statements around inclusion and the broader ethos or culture underpinning SEND units.

Establishing clearer and more consistent national definitions, terminology, and eligibility criteria (in line with changes to EHCPs) could also help provide an improved shared understanding among parents, schools, and local authorities around SEND units.

“There is a lack of clarity on the purpose of SEN units and resourced provision within mainstream settings, relating to ongoing conceptual debates on what terms like inclusion mean. We need clear expectations for learners, mainstream staff, and parents.”

**Philip Garner, Brunel University**

## Developing operating guidance for SEND units

DfE could develop a national operating framework for SEND units to guide how they should function in practice. This could build upon existing guidance and best practice.<sup>31</sup> Guidance could include expectations for:

- Curriculum access
- Specialised support and resources
- Staffing competencies
- Physical and sensory space requirements
- Organisation of SEND units by single- or multi-need
- Time spent in mainstream classrooms
- Leadership of SEND units and funding responsibilities
- Data collection
- Measuring effectiveness of SEND units, including defining appropriate metrics.

Any framework or guidance should allow sufficient flexibility to reflect differing pupil needs and local contexts. This could be complemented with best practice case studies, covering areas such as how to optimise space within the school or promote inclusion within mainstream settings.

## Strengthening oversight and strategic planning

DfE could improve national oversight and transparency by creating an accurate register of SEND units, ensuring consistent reporting of pupil placements. This could help inform decisions for where new SEND units are established, drawing on local and national data on SEND prevalence and need.

Expectations could also be set out for how SEND units will be considered in regular Ofsted inspections, ideally with regular review cycles involving input from pupils, parents, and staff. Consideration should also be given to how school accountability measures may create disincentives for schools to host higher numbers of pupils with SEND in SEND units, particularly where this is perceived to affect attainment or inspection outcomes.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Strogilos, V. et al., '[Inclusive provision for students with special educational needs and/or disabilities: A resourced provision toolkit](#)', University of Southampton (2023); National Deaf Children's Society & the National Sensory Impairment Partnership, '[Quality Standards for resource provisions for deaf children and young people in mainstream schools](#)' (2020) [accessed 25 March 2026].

<sup>32</sup> O'Regan, C. et al, '[Selective inclusion: The interplay of SEND and disadvantage in school admissions](#)', The Sutton Trust (2026).

## Supporting staff training for SEND units and the wider school workforce

DfE could explore how best to support the development of staff knowledge and skills relevant to SEND units, building on its wider commitment to improve SEND training for teachers.<sup>33</sup>

This could involve developing a framework or guidance to support training and professional development, including reviewing how SEND unit competencies are reflected in initial teacher training and continuing professional development, as well as identifying opportunities to share best practice across the system.

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<sup>33</sup> Department for Education, ['£200 million landmark SEND teacher training programme'](#) (2026) [accessed 25 March 2026].

## **Annex A: Contributing experts**

During this project, PIU conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 experts from academia and the third sector. These experts were identified through desk research.

Rachel Classick, **National Foundation for Educational Research**

Geraldene Codina, **University of Derby**

Anna Cook, **University of Surrey**

Johny Daniel, **Durham University**

Philip Garner, **Brunel University of London**

Corinna Grindle, **University of Warwick**

Jenna Julius, **National Foundation for Educational Research**

Brian Lamb, **University of Derby**

Brahm Norwich, **University of Exeter**

Sarah Parsons, **University of Southampton**

Ian Sinclair, **University of York**

Nidhi Singal, **University of Cambridge**

Vasilis Strogilos, **University of Southampton**

Jo Tolley, **University of Derby**

Matthew Walker, **National Foundation for Educational Research**



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