Department for Education

Inclusive education estates

Supporting inclusive environments in mainstream settings

June 2026

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Summary

This publication provides non-statutory guidance from the Department for Education (DfE). It has been produced to help local authorities, responsible bodies and education settings adapt buildings and spaces to support greater inclusion and positive learning experiences for all pupils, including children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Who this publication is for

This guidance is for:

- **local authorities (LAs),** including SEND access and capital planning teams, and those responsible for sufficiency planning, targeted investment, and support for mainstream inclusion
- **responsible bodies (RBs),**[1] including multi-academy trusts (MATs), single academy trusts, LAs, voluntary-aided school bodies, church trustees (including dioceses), and further education (FE) and sixth-form college corporations
- **education leaders and practitioners** working across education settings, including headteachers, special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs), teaching and support staff, premises teams, and school governors
- **professional advisers and delivery partners**, including education advisers, therapists, designers, architects, contractors, and others involved in assessing need or planning adaptations to education estates

[1] Responsible Body is a term used to refer to those responsible for the oversight and management of the school and college estate, alongside individual schools.

Introduction

Every child or young person deserves a high-quality, inclusive education, supported by an environment that meets their needs. This document offers practical guidance to help local authorities, responsible bodies and education settings adapt buildings and spaces to support greater inclusion and positive learning experiences for everyone, including children and young people with SEND.

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance reflects our plans for a more inclusive system, consistent with the aims set out in the Schools White Paper Every child achieving and thriving,[1] including a blueprint to improve opportunities for all children and generational reforms to the SEND system. It also sits alongside our Education Estates Strategy: a decade of national renewal,[2] which sets out the department's long-term plan to create an education estate that is safe, suitable, sustainable, and sufficiently sized, from early years to post-16.

For the purposes of this guidance, inclusion is understood as all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children and young people, so that they belong, achieve, and thrive.[3] Creating a physical environment that is suitable to meet their needs is an important part of achieving this.

This guidance translates established inclusive design principles, research, and practical examples into clear, actionable adaptations. These adaptations can be applied across mainstream settings and to a wide range of capital-funded projects, including inclusion bases[2] and school-based nurseries (SBNs), to help create a more inclusive education estate for all.

[2] Inclusion bases are provisions within mainstream settings for children and young people with SEND. The term covers provision previously referred to as SEN units, resourced provision, and pupil support units or schools' own SEND units.

Statutory duties

This is non-statutory guidance, and we recognise that its recommendations will need to be considered alongside other priorities in the education estate. It complements School and college design and construction,[4] which sets out standards and guidance for the design and construction of buildings and outdoor environments, including how design approaches can optimise inclusivity and accessibility.

While this guidance remains non-statutory, it must be considered in the context of relevant statutory duties:

- **sufficiency duty**: the Education Act 1996[5] requires local authorities (LAs) to ensure there are sufficient education places for pupils in their area, while section 27 of the Children and Families Act 2014[6] places a duty on LAs to keep SEND provision under review and ensure it is sufficient to meet the needs of children and young people in their area
- **accessibility strategy and plan**: under the Equality Act 2010,[7] LAs must prepare accessibility strategies for schools for which they are the responsible body (RB), and each RB must provide an up-to-date accessibility plan for their estate
- **reasonable adjustments**: education settings have clear legal duties under the Equality Act 2010[7] to make reasonable adjustments so disabled children and young people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to their peers, although schools are exempt where a physical feature places a disabled child or young person at a substantial disadvantage

It should also be considered in light of duties pertaining to:

- School Premises (England) Regulations 2012,[8] which set out minimum standards for the design, construction and maintenance of school buildings and facilities to ensure they are safe, suitable, and fit for purpose
- SEND Code of Practice,[9] which provides statutory guidance for organisations that work with and support children and young people with SEND
- Building Regulations and Approved Documents,[10] in relation to physical adaptations, particularly Part K (protection from falling, collision and impact) and Part M (access to and use of buildings, volume 2)

Additional relevant guidance

Users may also refer to BS 8300-1:2018 and BS 8300-2:2018 Design of an accessible and inclusive built environment, as well as Sport England's Accessible and Inclusive Sports Facilities (AISF) Guide 2022 for comprehensive guidance on accessibility and wider inclusion strands, and PAS 6463:2022

– Design for the Mind: Neurodiversity & the Built Environment. In particular, the access and inclusion file and tracker introduced in Sport England's AISF Part A are helpful tools when planning and documenting changes and decisions.

For new builds, the Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) Inclusive Design Overlay contains a wealth of information about project roles and responsibilities.

Core elements of inclusive design

This guidance draws on 10 core elements of inclusive design (below and in Figure 1) that can support children and young people, especially those with SEND, to achieve and thrive:

1. Accessibility and movement
2. Navigation and wayfinding
3. Quiet spaces and sensory comfort
4. Acoustics
5. Lighting and visual comfort
6. Ventilation
7. Thermal comfort
8. Access to nature
9. Sanitary provision
10. Furniture, fittings and equipment

For practical information about applying these elements, please refer to section 3. Please note that inclusion bases are covered separately in Inclusion Bases Guidance.

How this guidance supports inclusivity and accessibility

Many barriers experienced by children and young people, including those with SEND, can be reduced through well-designed adaptations to the education estate.

For children and young people with SEND, anxiety and sensory processing differences can contribute to dysregulation and feelings of overwhelm. These experiences can be intensified by sensory overload arising from the design of the physical environment or from activities taking place within it, such as exposure to crowds, noise and busy circulation routes.

In some cases, these challenges can extend beyond the school day, affecting behaviour at home and readiness for the following day, including increased anxiety around separation from caregivers.

The aim of this guidance is not to prescribe a single approach to designing or adapting education settings, but to give LAs, RBs, and estates teams the confidence to apply inclusive design approaches to their own context and to incorporate flexibility for change when needed.

Inclusive estates are a key enabler of inclusion, but they cannot deliver inclusive mainstream provision in isolation. To deliver meaningful change for children and young people, these improvements should be accompanied by the wider reforms to the SEND system as set out in the Schools White Paper Every child achieving and thriving.[1]

This guidance helps by:

- supporting value-for-money decision-making, helping RBs to target High Needs Provision Capital Allocations (HNPCA) where they will have the greatest impact
- highlighting practical examples of enhancements and improvements that support specific needs and activities
- providing simple tools and templates to help education settings understand children and young people's daily experiences and identify suitable adaptations
- supporting existing statutory requirements by illustrating how inclusive design elements can be applied proportionately across different types of provision

We recognise that all parts of the sector face competing resource and workforce pressures and this guidance is not intended to divert focus from existing priorities. Instead, it offers a set of tools for delivering a more inclusive estate with a focus on practical and achievable improvements.

Evidence-based benefits of inclusive design

This section demonstrates how inclusive design can support improved learning, enhanced wellbeing for pupils and staff, and more resilient environments that support needs over time.

Academic progress and attainment

An inclusive physical environment can make a meaningful difference to academic progress and attainment by supporting engagement and positive behaviour. This aligns with principles from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) that inclusive and supportive environments can help pupils engage in learning.[11]

This is further supported by academic research funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. The HEAD Project (Holistic Evidence and Design) found that seven key design parameters – light, temperature, air quality, ownership, flexibility, complexity, and colour – accounted for 16% of the variation in primary school pupils' learning progress over a year.[12]

Wellbeing and social and emotional development

Well-designed environments can support wellbeing, emotional regulation and positive social experiences for pupils and staff.

Design features such as natural light, planting, natural material finishes (such as timber), and views of nature are associated with reduced stress and improved mood and may support concentration and cognitive performance.[13]

Independence and preparation for adulthood

Inclusive design can support participation, autonomy, and confidence by reducing unnecessary environmental barriers.

Evidence from Ireland's National Council for Special Education (NCSE) suggests that well-designed, predictable and accessible classroom layouts can reduce cognitive, sensory and navigational demands.[14] When combined with appropriate routines, support and teaching strategies, environmental clarity and consistency can play an enabling role in promoting greater independence and participation, particularly for pupils with additional needs.

Wider education and community benefits

Inclusive design is an important way to support early intervention, improving outcomes and experiences across the pupil population. Even where recorded levels of SEND are low, wider needs may be present – for example, due to sensory differences or undiagnosed needs.

Evidence from the EEF highlights that environments designed to reduce barriers for pupils with SEND can also benefit the wider population.[11] In practice, this may include clear classroom layouts, predictable circulation routes, well-managed acoustics, reduced visual clutter and access to calm breakout areas.[15]

Figure 1: Core elements of inclusive design

Funding inclusivity improvements to the estate

Creating an inclusive education environment does not always require high-cost adaptations. Well-chosen, affordable adaptations can quickly remove barriers for children and young people and help education settings make efficient use of time and available resources.

Setting-level and local funding routes that may be considered when planning estate adaptations include:

- High Needs Provision Capital Allocations (HNPCA) via the LA
- the Inclusive Mainstream Fund (IMF), which is intended to help mainstream settings become more inclusive
- trust or school reserves

High needs provision capital allocations (HNPCA)

The department makes high needs capital available to LAs to support them in fulfilling their duty to provide sufficient and suitable places for children and young people with SEND. This funding is intended to be spent across all education phases, including early years and post-16, and in settings both maintained by RBs and the LA.

LAs are expected to invest this funding to support inclusion in mainstream settings, as set out in the Grant Spend Guidance.[16] Alongside expanding access to inclusion bases, this may include improving the accessibility and inclusivity of buildings and outdoor environments for children and young people with SEND, drawing on the principles set out in this guidance.

When returning Local SEND Reform Plans and HNPCA returns, LAs should set out any relevant plans for how their capital investment will support improved inclusivity and accessibility.

Assessing the inclusivity of the estate

This section supports different parts of the sector – local authorities, responsible bodies, and education settings – to identify and implement suitable inclusive design elements.

Core approach

The essential sequence for assessing needs, identifying barriers in the estate, and driving improvement remains the same for all parts of the sector:

- identify needs to be addressed
- prioritise adaptations that maximise impact
- deliver and review those adaptations

While the overall approach is shared, local authorities (LAs), responsible bodies (RBs), and education settings have distinct roles to play. For example, LAs and RBs play a pivotal role in capital planning and estates management, while settings know their premises and the needs of children and young people.

Planning adaptations at a local level

Education settings face unique challenges and opportunities in adapting their physical environments, which may require creativity in identifying the most impactful solutions. For example, many school buildings are older or face significant space constraints, meaning adaptations must take account of existing physical limitations.

Assessing current and future need

A targeted, needs-led approach to identifying appropriate adaptations across the local area can help focus capital investment where it will have the greatest impact.

Assessing needs as early as possible across all phases strengthens the accuracy and impact of local investment planning. This helps ensure that funding is directed towards adaptations that:

- support the most critical emerging needs
- address gaps in local provision

Identifying adaptations and improvements

LAs decide how high needs capital funding is allocated across schools, colleges and early years settings in their area.

Where LAs invest in inclusive design adaptations, they should consult with their settings and consider how to best to target their investment, for example, through initiatives such as local bidding processes.

High Needs Capital Allocation (HNPCA) is not limited to maintained schools. RBs, including multi-academy trusts

(MATs), may benefit from this funding where proposals align with local special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision priorities.[16] Partnership working between LAs and RBs is encouraged to ensure investment is targeted where it can have the greatest impact. RBs are encouraged to engage with their LA to understand the process for accessing HNPCA or other relevant funding.

When deciding between different projects or adaptations, aspects to consider include:

- **impact**: which interventions deliver the greatest benefits, target the right needs, or support the greatest number of children and young people?
- **economies of scale**: can projects be grouped by location, cost or adaptation type, to maximise impact and achieve economies of scale?
- **longer-term goals and planning**: do proposals align with estate strategies, development plans, condition improvement priorities, accessibility improvements and local capital programmes?
- **lifecycle costs:** will the proposed adaptation support more sustainable outcomes and value-for-money over time?

Planning for a successful implementation

Before moving forward, adaptations should be:

- safe
- practical for everyday use
- informed by feedback from staff and pupils

Timely and well-coordinated funding decisions are important to support efficient procurement, minimise exposure to inflation, and avoid passing cost and delivery risks to education settings.

Assessing the physical environment

Whole-setting accessibility assessment

Accessibility assessments help settings understand the impact of the physical environment on enabling or limiting access, participation and independence. They help identify short-term adjustments or longer-term solutions. Assessments should consider:

- **physical access**: external and internal routes from entries to buildings and movement throughout the day, including entrances, drop-off points, path widths, surface finishes, level changes, ramps, doors, stairs and lifts
- **daily routines**: transitions, queuing, busy periods, gate congestion, and drop off and collection arrangements
- **sensory environment**: lighting, glare, acoustics, noise, temperature, smells, access to nature, shade or shelter, clutter and predictability

- **wayfinding**: clear, consistent signage and cues
- **equipment and technology**: availability and suitability of assistive and curriculum related equipment
- **emergency arrangements**: how independent and safe evacuation can be better supported, including through discussion with the children or young person and their families where appropriate, so that individual needs can be identified and addressed – evac chairs must be provided where specified in a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP)
- **specialist curriculum areas**: science, food technology, art, music, physical education (PE) and workshops, both indoors and outdoors
- **personal care**: privacy, dignity, ease of access and the suitability of equipment
- **independence**: furniture, storage, assistive technology, play and physical activity provision and predictable transitions

Implementing adaptations

The findings and recommendations of an accessibility audit should be based on an anticipatory approach to future needs, while also prioritising adaptations to meet existing needs, and informing both immediate actions and longer-term planning.

Inclusive adaptations should be embedded within a setting's long term estate strategy, with SEND considerations informing ongoing maintenance,[17,18] future development, and investment. This can feed directly into the Accessibility Plan (Schedule 10 of the Equality Act 2010),[7] the SEN Information Report, School Development and Premises Plans, and wider LA or RB estate strategies.

Access to suitable project management expertise will vary across LA, RBs, and settings, and securing this capability may require additional resource or external support.

Involving children and young people, families and staff

The voices of people with lived experience are essential for understanding environmental barriers. Children and young people often notice triggers or pressure points that adults may overlook.

Staff and site teams often hold insight into patterns not visible through data alone, while parents and carers hold crucial knowledge about sensory profiles, triggers, anxieties and successful strategies. Assessments should include:

- **children and young people with SEND:** visual tools, "day-in-the-life" approaches, walkthroughs and anonymous feedback opportunities

- **parents and carers**: questionnaires, structured conversations at key transition points (for example, at the start of the day), and sharing home-school observations.
- **staff and visiting professionals**: short surveys, focus groups, walks with facilities management teams and collaborative mapping of hotspots.
- **knowledge-sharing between schools**: including visits to local special schools to understand what types of adaptations work well for different needs.

This helps ensure that environments are assessed based on real use, not just design.

Tools for understanding the daily experience

While data and formal assessments are important, they often miss the subtle, day-to-day moments where the education environment either supports or challenges children and young people's ability to learn, participate and feel safe.

When considering how lived experience complements data to create a full and accurate understanding of need, settings may wish to draw on the **"Day in the Life"** approach.

This exercise can help education settings step into the shoes of a child or young person with a specific type of SEND and try to experience the entire school day from that person's perspective. The process not only highlights practical opportunities for adaptations but also helps builds stronger empathy and understanding.

Education settings should consider what happens from the start to the end of each day, for example:

- locations within buildings and outdoor areas where children experience physical barriers, stress, sensory overload or confusion.
- arrival, movement between lessons, dining, social times, sensory circuits, transitions and end-of-day routines.
- the need for calm, quiet spaces, both indoors and outdoors.

Visual mapping (for example, on floor plans or simple timelines) can make it easier to spot identify patterns and prioritise areas for improvement.

Engaging with experts

Education settings may wish to involve education and SEND specialists such as occupational therapists (OTs), speech and language therapists (SaLTs), educational psychologists (EPs), and specialist or advisory teachers in accessibility assessments. They can support the accurate interpretation of needs and help identify appropriate adaptations.

The Department for Education (DfE) is providing funding for local area partnerships to develop the Experts at Hand offer,

which provides access to expert advice from OTs, SaLTs and EPs and specialist resources for mainstream settings. This could include seeking expert advice to inform a full accessibility and inclusion audit.

Additional expertise may include:

- **accredited members of the National Register of Access Consultants (NRAC):** for formal access auditing and inclusive design consultancy
- **architects:** to support adaptations to indoor areas.
- **landscape architects and/or outdoor learning specialists:** to support adaptations to outdoor areas
- **LA or MAT support teams**: for example, access, SEND and estates

Reviewing adaptations

Ongoing review is essential following building work or improvements to ensure spaces continue to work for everyone. Barriers may shift with new environments, routines and cohorts, so gathering feedback from users can help identify what has improved and where further changes may be needed. Regular review supports education settings to remain responsive and prevents small issues becoming bigger problems.

Reviews can also identify underused areas of the estate that could be repurposed before investing in new changes. This aligns with principles set out in the DfE's Good estate management for schools guidance.[17] Consider also adaptations alongside planned maintenance to the wider estate.[18]

We recommend using simple tools such as follow-up audits, post-occupancy evaluations, or site-in-use checks. Key questions to ask include:

- does the adaptation solve the original problem?
- have any new issues appeared?
- are children and young people using the new space or equipment as intended?

For each adaptation, it is recommended to keep record of:

- purpose and expected outcome
- who delivered it, when and where
- cost, including time and money
- impact on progress and access to learning

Regular reviews help education settings prioritise building work and target investment based on evidence of where it makes the most difference. LAs, RBs and education settings sharing results helps everyone learn what works, avoid repeating mistakes, and build inclusive environments together.

Case studies

Wakefield Council: the role of the LA

Maximising the impact of inclusivity and accessibility adaptations across the mainstream estate in Wakefield

Objective: Wakefield Council's High Needs Capital Grant programme has been in place since 2021 to support education settings across the area to create more supportive environments for children and young people with SEND. Grants typically range from £5,000 to £50,000.

Understanding local needs: In 2025-26, Wakefield Council identified that many schools had busy corridors and unsuitable outdoor areas, with no quiet zones. This contributed to children and young people's anxiety and incidents of dysregulation. The LA prioritised support for secondary pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, allocating funding to seven schools. This strengthened equity across education phases, as earlier funding rounds had been accessed mainly by primary schools.

Identifying adaptations: Schools were supported to deliver projects quickly and flexibly, making use of existing opportunities, such as converting unused rooms. Projects focused on creating indoor or outdoor spaces for sensory stimulation or for emotional regulation and retreat. There was strong engagement with children and young people, staff, parents and specialist professionals throughout the design and development process.

Impact: Since 2021, over £2.1 million has been allocated to more than 70 education settings, including more than £970,000 invested in repurposing existing spaces in 35 schools. All participating settings have reported benefits:

- calmer classrooms and fewer incidents of dysregulation
- pupils returning to class more settled and ready to learn
- improved communication, social interaction, and emotional regulation.
- increased community use of school facilities
- improved parental confidence and strong staff feedback
- enhanced collaboration between SEND leads and/or special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), teachers and external specialists

Key lessons learned: Targeted investment can have a positive impact on the school community. Meaningful change is possible at a modest cost, strengthening inclusive practices and improving pupil experiences of school.

Ormiston Academies Trust and City of Wolverhampton Council: LA and RB collaboration

Strategic partnership and collaboration between a MAT and LA

Objective: This MAT and LA had a goal of co-developing inclusive adaptations that support needs both within the trust and across the local area. They aimed to create additional, suitable places for pupils with speech, language and communication needs, enabling up to 20 more children and young people to attend mainstream settings by 2028, and addressing local demand for SEND provision.

Collaboration: The LA contributed capital funding, while the Trust drew on SEND expertise to shape the design and delivery of the provision. Trust-wide innovation, led by Ormiston's estates team, supported the design of flexible, multi-purpose teaching and sensory spaces. An example of a calm, quiet space designed to support sensory comfort and relaxation is shown in Figure 2.

Adaptations: Investment in Ormiston NEW Academy includes the replacement and refurbishment of key facilities such as the food technology room, performing arts spaces, and changing areas. These upgrades form part of the wider response to the continued rise in demand for suitable places for children and young people with SEND.

Impact: investment in the estate has strengthened mainstream provision, support by a focus on transitions, curriculum development, and targeted intervention.

Figure 2: Calm, quiet space

How to apply inclusive design for everyone

This section demonstrates how the ten core elements of inclusive design can be put into practice. It offers adaptable, practical examples to support the creation of supportive indoor and outdoor environments, recognising that not every adaptation will be appropriate in every setting. The focus is on environmental adaptations, so management, building user behaviours, pedagogy or curriculum are out of scope.

Core elements of inclusive design

The 10 core elements of inclusive design are:

1. Accessibility and movement
2. Navigation and wayfinding
3. Quiet spaces and sensory comfort
4. Acoustics
5. Lighting and visual comfort
6. Ventilation
7. Thermal comfort
8. Access to nature
9. Sanitary provision
10. Furniture, fittings and equipment

Used together, they support informed prioritisation of adaptations to reduce barriers to children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), helping them and their peers to achieve and thrive in mainstream settings. Inclusive design is not about expensive specialist solutions. It is a way of thinking that helps every child and young person feel safe, supported and able to take part fully in education.

When considering adaptations, seeking end user views is a helpful starting point and encourages engagement and ownership. It is recommended to:

- place people at the heart of the design process (refer to section 2)
- acknowledge diversity and difference
- offer choice where a single design solution cannot accommodate all users
- provide for flexibility in use
- provide buildings and environments that are convenient and enjoyable for everyone to use
- consult specialists if needed

Please refer to section 3.2 for the application of adaptations in the settings for the different stages of education and section 4 for examples of inclusive design adaptations to real settings.

1 Accessibility and movement

What is the core design element?

Implement practical measures that enable children and young people with visual or mobility difficulties, or who are deaf, to gain independence and move safely.

Why is it important?

Consistent routes, unobstructed thresholds and clear sightlines can increase independence and participation and reduce the risk of incidents or injuries.

How can it be achieved?

Good accessibility is not only about compliance. It supports dignity, predictability and low stress movement, while also strengthening site security through visible, well-used circulation routes with good sightlines. Clear, logical circulation reduces the risk of collisions, isolation and anxiety, particularly during busy transition times.

There are various ways support this, including:

- keeping routes wide and clear and providing level thresholds and reliable lifts
- using strong visual contrast and textured surfaces and maintaining consistent lighting and sightlines
- ensuring classrooms allow full mobility and safe movement around the space

Example adaptations for accessibility and movement

See below for examples of how to improve accessibility and movement, and in particular, ways to provide movement and sensory-motor support both indoors and outdoors.

General improvements

- keep corridors clear by removing unnecessary items
- remove or smooth small trip hazards
- offer and install evac chairs to support emergency evacuation where applicable and specified as part of an agreed Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP)
- add simple rest points, such as seating, along long routes
- separate pedestrian and bicycle, scooter and vehicle routes
- reduce door opening force by adjusting door closers
- provide step free level access to door openings
- widen doorways where possible
- use colour contrast to steps, handrails and thresholds
- add tactile markers such as textured flooring at key points
- use wayfinding markers such as arrows, dots or icons
- make paths and key destinations, such as toilets, changing, dining areas or quiet areas easier to see through clear signage, sightlines and good lighting

- provide consistent, well-positioned lighting that supports visibility and communication

Movement and sensory-motor support (indoors)

- use gentle slopes rather than ramps
- install handrails along long corridors
- use surface finishes that make mobility easy and safe
- install lifts where needed for safe evacuation or access, including access to stages
- depending on specific sensory need, access to the following features may be suitable:
  - structured movement opportunities such as indoor traverses, obstacle courses and balance training areas to support regulation and physical confidence (see example in Figure 3)
  - sensory-motor circuits, which could include wall mounted interactive sensory and movement panels

Movement and sensory-motor support (outdoors)

- use firm, smooth, non-slip, step-free surfaces
- add clear visual playground markings to support play and movement
- add tactile warning surfaces at hazard and decision points
- provide inclusive play equipment for a range of abilities
- include balance and coordination trails, such as logs, stepping stones and gentle slopes
- provide sheltered seating, with wheelchair spaces
- install lifts as needed, including to access play
- depending on specific sensory need, access to the following features may be suitable:
  - balance features like basket swings or spinners
  - outdoor elements supporting proprioception (body awareness), such as push walls, resistance panels and climbing nets
  - wall- or fence-mounted sensory-motor panels in courtyards or on the edges of playgrounds

Figure 3: Indoor movement activity examples

2 Navigation and wayfinding

What is the core design element?

Wayfinding is the process by which people navigate through spaces. It requires careful design of routes, starting from key arrival and drop off points and paths, and continuing into the building.

It should consider orientation and navigation across the whole journey, including transitions between spaces, both indoors and outdoors.

Why is it important?

Orientation and navigation can be challenging for some pupils with SEND, particularly where sensory processing differences are present. Areas of high activity, congestion and confusing circulation routes can affect confidence and independence. Unclear signage and wayfinding can also increase anxiety and affect emotional regulation.[15] Clear navigation is vital in the context of emergency evacuation and may in some cases support PEEPs.

How can it be achieved?

Effective navigation and wayfinding can be supported by:

- establishing simple and consistent visual markers, reducing clutter and addressing circulation pinch points where possible - see the Department for Education's (DfE) School and college design and construction suite.[4]
- using multi-sensory cues to support safe, independent navigation, recognising that people navigate in different ways, depending on age, ability and cognitive or sensory differences[15]
- using simple, predictable layouts to reduce anxiety and support confidence
- providing clear sightlines, uncluttered routes and logical placement of classrooms, group rooms and shared spaces to support effective circulation, particularly for pupils who may find longer distances or busy corridors challenging
- using consistent signage, for example colour, symbols and raised (embossed) text, to help children and young people recognise destinations and navigate independently
- where appropriate, using subtle audio cues, such as gravel, timber decking or textured surfaces that produce recognisable sounds underfoot, to support orientation
- using zoning, including gradual changes in colour, flooring, lighting or furniture, to signal transitions between quiet, active or social areas and help pupils understand what to expect

Example adaptations for navigation and wayfinding

Please see below for examples relating to corridors and routes, arrival and transitions, and signage.

Corridors and routes

- keep corridors clear by removing unnecessary furniture and clutter, especially on narrow routes, to preserve passing space and avoid congestion at peak times
- create small pause points where possible, such as cleared alcoves or recesses
- break up long corridors using windows, intersections or pause points such as alcoves, or add calming artwork or images of nature, and matt wall finishes in muted colours (see examples in Figure 4)
- improve sightlines and lighting to make routes feel safer and more predictable
- clearly signpost alternative routes for accessibility, for example step-free or wider routes
- use simple arrows, dots or icons at age-appropriate heights
- use visual wayfinding cues such as colour, artwork, floor finishes or outdoor planting, designed with users
- use consistent signage and colours for stairs and lifts
- improve lighting and sightlines for calm, easy navigation
- provide accessible, campus-style maps for larger or multi-building sites to support orientation

Arrival and transitions

- keep entrance and arrival spaces calm by providing a quiet alternative waiting area
- provide consistent, easy-to-recognise places such as calm corners or seating, where space allows, to help users locate themselves and find their way
- provide clear routes from arrival to destination, for example, from gate to entrance to reception to classroom

Signage

- use high-contrast text and backgrounds
- support text with pictorial systems such as Makaton
- use consistent symbols across the setting
- use embossed (tactile) text and symbols where appropriate
- install durable, high-contrast outdoor signage at child height and decision points

Figure 4: Colour, graphics and wayfinding pause points

3 Quiet spaces and sensory comfort

What is the core design element?

This design element focuses on creating spaces that support self-management of sensory processing differences. This may include providing calm, quiet spaces with flexible use and low-sensory stimulation, as well as spaces for stimulation, such as sensory rooms.

In some settings, there may be a greater need for quiet, calm spaces than for sensory rooms with a wider range of uses, although this is not always reflected in design decisions.

Why is it important?

Sensory overwhelm and dysregulation can cause discomfort and make it harder for pupils to learn, communicate and connect with others.

How can it be achieved?

To create a suitable sensory environment, settings can:

- reduce sensory stimulation as much as possible, provide access to a quiet, calm space, and where appropriate, facilitate access to a sensory room for stimulation
- address triggers such as sight, sound, smell, and touch
- manage cognitive load through design, paying attention to factors such as noise, visual clutter, unpredictable movement, complex layouts or inconsistent lighting
- locate low stimulus quiet spaces close to main teaching areas so they can be accessed easily from teaching spaces with minimal disruption to others
- keep layouts simple, consistent and uncluttered to reduce cognitive load
- ensure enough space for an adult to sit beside or work with the child or young person, regardless of age.
- limit the amount of wall display space in learning areas (classrooms, studios, workshops, libraries) and corridors and consider the intensity of displays to reduce visual clutter and distraction
- introduce nature-based elements such as plants or views of the natural environment, which can help reduce the mental effort needed to maintain focus[15,19]

The support required to achieve sensory comfort varies significantly across individuals, so investment in sensory rooms should only made where there is a clear, specified need, with specialist and evidence-based advice on its benefits and usage, rather than as a generic intervention for all pupils.

Example adaptations for sensory comfort

See below for ways to provide quiet spaces, sensory stimulation, and a comfortable environment across the setting.

Calm, low stimulation spaces

- provide calm, predictable, low stimulus spaces for rest and self-regulation
- include a mix of spaces such as:
    - dedicated rooms in a quiet area
    - zoned indoor or outdoor calm areas
    - small, informal spaces such as dens, nooks, soft-furnished alcoves, screened-off corners, pods (as shown in Figure 5), or sheltered gardens
- mark low-stimulus areas with muted colours or soft lighting

Sensory stimulation spaces

Where there is a clear and specified need, on the basis of evidence-based advice and where there is space to do so, settings may wish to consider:

- purpose-designed sensory rooms with controlled lighting, tactile features, soft play, and immersive equipment, such as bubble tubes and projected image systems
- soft play rooms to support emotional regulation and energy release, especially for younger children
- visual feedback, such as mirror panels, where helpful, to support body awareness and movement regulation

Layout, movement, and transitions

- use seating such as benches or bean bags to define areas
- allow sufficient space for users to pace or walk around
- create pause points along indoor and outdoor routes using seating or recessed areas to support calm transitions
- use vision panels along circulation routes and glazed screens to classrooms so pupils can see what is coming

Dining and shared spaces

- simplify layouts and queueing routes
- reduce noise by adding wall or ceiling sound absorbing materials, such as acoustic panels, soft furnishings, or caps on chair legs to avoid scraping
- provide separate, quieter dining or breaktime areas where sensory overload is minimised

Figure 5: Accessible quiet pod installed in surplus space

4 Acoustics

What is the core design element?

Managing sound indoors and outdoors to help reduce distractions and support clear communication.

Why is it important?

Good acoustics can make it easier to concentrate, communicate and process information.[20] This is important for everyone, especially those with sensory hypersensitivities (often associated with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, deafness, or hearing loss).[21] Clarity of sound is essential for people with sight loss who rely on sound for navigation and directional cues.

How can it be achieved?

Approaches to improving acoustics may include:

- reducing indoor noise, particularly unwanted background noise such as pipework and air handling units
- managing the impact of external noise, including roads, railways, and playgrounds, on indoor and outdoor environments, through effective site layout and natural measures such as landscaping and acoustic fencing
- using acoustic design measures to limit echo, reduce competing noise sources and improve speech intelligibility

Acoustic professionals' advice should be sought where improvements to the sound conditions are being considered, specifically where any material change to the school building fabric is being made. They can advise on the most cost-effective efficient solutions to improve.[22,23,24]

Example adaptations for improving acoustics

Please see below for ways to reduce background noise and manage internal and external noise throughout the setting.

Reducing echo and background noise

- reduce reverberation (echo) by adding soft materials such as fabric noticeboards, curtains, rugs or acoustic wall and ceiling absorbers - see Figures 6 and 7 for examples in classroom and dining settings
- use acoustic treatment such as rafts, panels or open-air acoustic pods to create clearly defined quiet zones, especially in open plan spaces
- designate and clearly identify quieter areas
- control noise from furniture, fittings and equipment, by fitting felt pads or rubber feet to chairs and tables to minimise noise from moving furniture
- install soft close fittings, door dampers or stoppers
- fit doors with acoustic seals to limit noise transfer
- use low noise ventilation units, hand dryers and appliances

- specify quiet ventilation, heating, and IT equipment

Layout, zoning and space planning

- separate noisy and quiet activities through zoning using dividers or furniture
- manage noise through timetabling and coordinated use of shared or open plan spaces
- position storerooms or similar spaces between noisy and quiet rooms to act as sound buffers
- use solid, floor-to-ceiling partitions with no gaps to stop sound passing between rooms
- locate noisy equipment or activities away from quiet areas

Indoor learning environments

- in lecture spaces and classrooms, consider assistive audio amplification listening systems
- in open plan learning resource centres, libraries, and common rooms, provide speech friendly pods or booths and use suspended acoustic rafts over discussion areas.
- in early years create quiet den areas in rooms (not corridors), with rugs, fabric panels, pinboards and furniture

Managing external and sudden noise

- limit the impact of external noise through considered site layout, planting and acoustic fencing where needed
- replace school bells and alarm systems with visual alert or pre-warning systems to reduce sudden loud noise

Figure 6: Acoustic ceiling panels in a primary classroom

Figure 7: Acoustic wall and ceiling panels in dining space

5 Lighting and visual comfort

What is the core design element?

Designing daylighting, lighting and colour schemes to support visual comfort, clear vision, concentration and sensory regulation.

Why is it important?

Effective lighting can reduce eye strain and visual fatigue, particularly for those who are sensitive to glare, contrast or direct sunlight. Lighting that minimises harsh reflections, alongside appropriate colour and material choices, can improve visibility and contrast and support lip reading.

Children and young people with visual impairments often require higher and more consistent lighting levels. Clear visibility of faces is also important for people with hearing loss, whether permanent or intermittent, such as glue ear, to support lipreading and interpretation of non-verbal cues.

How can it be achieved?

A range of approaches can support lighting and visual comfort, including:

- maximising natural daylight and providing uniform, controllable, and adjustable lighting at appropriate illuminance levels, with glare carefully managed (it is helpful to have different lighting options for different tasks)
- using colour and finishes in a planned way to make spaces easy to see, easy to understand and visually comfortable[25]
- for signing, ensure good visual contrast between background surfaces and the person signing, so that hand movements and facial expressions are clearly visible
- consult a lighting specialist when designing new lighting, or if existing lighting is negatively affecting occupants
- consider lighting direction: harsh downward lighting can cast shadows on faces, making lipreading more difficult, meanwhile, even lighting helps others see people, objects and teaching materials clearly
- outdoor features such as trees, pergolas and canopies can provide dappled shade that reduces glare while maintaining good natural light. Careful use of landscaping, materials and canopies can create calmer, more visually comfortable environments
- where possible, integrate outdoor lighting with landscape elements to provide gentle, indirect illumination and reduce visible light sources outdoors

Example adaptations for lighting and visual comfort

Please see below for examples of how to improve lighting and visual comfort to support visibility, concentration and sensory regulation throughout the setting:

- replace harsh or flickering lamps with warm white LEDs, as shown in Figure 8
- add diffusers (light covers) to reduce glare and create even, diffused, indirect lighting that minimises harsh shadows
- use lights that shine light upwards or bounce light off walls and ceilings wherever possible
- avoid flashing, colour changing or motion activated lighting in learning and transition spaces
- control daylight with roller blinds or voile curtains rather than venetian blinds to soften contrast and control glare.
- keep lighting levels consistent along outdoor routes and entrances to prevent sudden brightness changes
- provide adjustable controls for brightness and colour to suit different activities, daylight conditions and individual needs
- choose matt, low reflective wall finishes in muted colours
- reduce visual clutter in display areas
- use soft, low-level lighting in quiet or cosy spaces, as shown in Figure 9

Figure 8: Warm, white, and even LED lighting

Figure 9: Muted natural colours and daylight

6 Ventilation

What is the core design element?

Ventilation means bringing or allowing fresh air into a space and removing stale air, using natural, mechanical, or mixed systems, so the room stays healthy, comfortable and easy to breathe in. Air quality refers to the level of pollutants present, whether generated indoors or from external sources.

Why is it important?

Good ventilation supports indoor air quality, which is important for concentration, comfort and overall wellbeing in learning environments. Exposure to indoor and outdoor air pollutants is strongly associated with increased asthma and allergic symptoms, losing concentration, becoming drowsy, uncomfortable and less able to self-regulate.

How can it be achieved?

- in many spaces, ventilation can be improved simply by opening windows and doors
- maintain a balance of fresh air supply and effective removal of stale air through natural or mechanical systems
- further guidance on how to improve ventilation and indoor air quality can be found: Ventilation and air quality in education and childcare settings - GOV.UK

Example adaptations for improved ventilation

- ensure that windows are not painted shut and can be opened safely
- fit secure opening restrictors so windows can be used for natural ventilation while maintaining safety and security.
- Install trickle vents with adjustable airflow controls to allow steady background ventilation
- use environmental sensors, such as CO_2 monitors with visual indicators, to monitor indoor air quality without using audible alarms
- use fragrance-free cleaning products and remove artificial air fresheners
- choose furniture and fittings with low chemical (low VOC) emission levels
- use plants, trees, and natural landscaping to help improve air quality
- locate outdoor learning and play areas away from busy roads to reduce pollution exposure

7 Thermal comfort

What is the core design element?

Thermal comfort reflects occupants' satisfaction with how warm or cool a space feels, influenced not only by air temperature but also by air movement, humidity and activity levels.

Why is it important?

Uncomfortable conditions, including high humidity, may increase sensory discomfort, reduce attention and affect cognitive performance. Children and young people may be particularly affected due to limited control over their environment.[26]

How can it be achieved?

Ensure that comfort is maintained in summer, winter and throughout interluding periods for comfort, concentration and participation.

Example adaptations for thermal comfort

- use blinds or solar window film to reduce glare or unwelcomed heat gain
- install canopies for shade to reduce heat and make outdoor areas more comfortable throughout the year
- introduce flexible outdoor shading such as movable parasols, shade sails and planting to improve thermal comfort in hot weather
- avoid dark coloured finishes and non–natural hard surfaces close to buildings, as these absorb and retain heat
- use trees, planting and light-coloured paving materials to increase natural shading and moderate temperature; tree canopies can provide dappled shade creating cooler, more thermally comfortable outdoor environments, reducing solar heat gain to buildings
- provide cross ventilation in teaching spaces where possible
- use night-time ventilation in classrooms and corridors to cool spaces before the school day and improve comfort during hot weather, taking building security into consideration
- use portable, low noise fans or air circulators to support airflow without sudden drafts
- add draft-proofing around doors and windows to reduce cold air movement

8 Access to nature

What is the core design element?

Well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces that make it easy to enjoy and connect with nature.

Why is it important?

Connecting people with nature can reduce stress, improve mood and support cognitive performance,[27] with particular benefits for those who experience sensory overload or anxiety.

A 2024 Educational Psychology Review study showed that access to green spaces in school settings can support children and young people to regulate emotions, reduce stress and improve attention, contributing to better behavioural and cognitive outcomes.[28] Systematic evidence reviews highlight that access to natural environments is consistently associated with improved learning, behaviour and health outcomes, supporting pupils' cognitive development, attention, and social skills, as well as contributing to overall wellbeing.[29]

Access to nature is unequal, and interactions with the natural world at school can provide more equitable access.

How can it be achieved?

Use natural materials, maximise daylight and views of nature, and create year-round access to gardens and growing spaces. This includes using natural materials, textures, colours, and nature inspired patterns inside and outside buildings to help people feel more connected to nature.

Access to nature should be available to all pupils, including those who may find outdoor environments overwhelming or unpredictable. Both indoor and outdoor connections to nature should be considered as part of environmental design.

Where possible, a variety of nature-based experiences should be provided to meet differing sensory preferences and tolerance levels. Involving children and young people, staff, parents and local volunteers in planting and maintenance can reduce costs, build ownership and develop life skills.

Example adaptations for access to nature

See below for examples of how to increase access to nature in a range of contexts, including in buildings and outdoors.

Indoor nature-inspired design

- nature inspired materials such as timber, cork and stone effect finishes
- calming, nature inspired colours such as greens, muted blues and soft neutrals

- biophilic design features such as planters, timber handrails and natural colour palettes
- low maintenance indoor planting, planters or green walls
- nature imagery and murals sparingly to avoid sensory overload, but to introduce calm
- seasonal cues indoors through views of planting, weather and daylight changes
- floor finishes such as timber effect vinyl, linoleum or cork, which also support acoustic comfort

Views, daylight and connection to outdoors

- maximise natural daylight and views of nature or sky from classrooms, corridors and calm rooms
- position furniture to face these views where appropriate
- create window seats or indoor ‘nature pause points’ with views to outdoor spaces
- locate nurture rooms, sensory spaces, and small group areas overlooking planting, gardens, or natural features

Indoor access to nature

- indoor restorative areas using planting, greenhouses, terrariums or simple natural elements
- direct access to restorative areas such as gardens, planted terraces, courtyards or shaded seating
- natural materials and textures to add warmth, reduce sensory stress and improve durability
- canopies to provide covered indoor-outdoor transition areas connected to nature

Outdoor nature-led places

- zoned playgrounds to separate active and quiet areas
- planting, hedges or willow screens to divide outdoor spaces instead of fencing, where possible
- sensory-motor elements such as:
    - textured sensory pathways and trim trails, which are outdoor exercise paths along which people can stop and do different physical activities
    - natural play such as logs and stepping stones
- safety surfaces that are not rubber crumb where possible because of environmental concerns
- outdoor learning shelters for calm engagement
- shaded social play spaces using willow structures for domes, outdoor classrooms or tunnels
- calm seating under trees, or wildlife observation areas
- natural textures and materials (planting, timber, stone, water features, tactile surfaces) to support calm and focus

Figures 10 and 11 show examples of outdoor planting spaces and learning environments designed for flexible use.

Planting and sensory gardens

Education settings may wish to create gardens with quiet zones and sensory planting, for example:

- textural plants for gentle touch: Lamb's Ear (Stachys byzantina), Creeping Thyme (Thymus serpyllum)
- fragrant plants for calming sensory input: Lavender (Lavandula angustifolia), Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis), Lemon Balm (Melissa officinalis)
- movement plants that respond to wind: Calamagrostis 'Karl Foerster', Osier Willow (Salix viminalis)
- green pockets with beds or planters, with easy to maintain edible plants such as herbs

Figure 10: Calming outdoor environment for flexible use

Figure 11: Edible garden and outdoor classroom

9 Sanitary provision

What is the core design element?

Suitable sanitary provision ensures everyone can easily access and use toilets and washing spaces safely, comfortably and with dignity.

Why is it important?

Well-designed, appropriately located provision is critical to support emotional wellbeing and safe participation. We know that well-located, well-designed, suitably sized spaces lower sensory stress, build confidence, and facilitate independence. This can reduce anxiety, avoidance, accidents, and distress.

How can it be achieved?

- provide wheelchair and ambulant accessible toilets across the site that are easy to reach including from outdoor areas, and co-located with standard provision
- consider a Changing Places toilet or hygiene room
- review pupil toilet provision with children and young people, including those with SEND, to understand causes of anxiety
- check sanitary provision is compliant with regulatory standards including visual colour contrast of fixtures and operation, as shown in Figure 12[4,30,31,32]

Figure 12: Non-institutional accessible toilet

Example adaptations for improved sanitary provision

- provide some fully enclosed toilet rooms with a toilet and basin, separate from main toilet areas, including facilities designed to meet accessibility needs to support ease of use for all pupils
- provide accessible toilets on every floor and with access from outside. Locate these near key areas such as dining spaces, sports facilities, inclusion bases and entrances
- include a Changing Places toilet and hygiene rooms with hoists, storage, changing benches and wash facilities, located where they will be most used, including community use areas
- include both wheelchair-accessible and ambulant accessible toilets with grabrails for people who can walk but need extra support
- provide at least one extra wide cubicle in each toilet block with more than four toilets
- apply previous core design principles to wash facilities, for example, using calm, non-stimulating décor, and improving acoustics, lighting, and ventilation, as shown in Figure 13
- install quiet flush toilets with easy-to-use controls
- use sensor taps and automatic dryers to reduce touch sensitivity and improve hygiene
- provide paper towel dispensers in some toilets instead of hand dryers and use low-noise or Quiet Mark certified hand dryers elsewhere
- install height adjustable basins where needed, including in hygiene rooms and food technology spaces
- use slip-resistant flooring throughout toilet and changing areas

Figure 13: Pupil-friendly toilet provision

10 Furniture, fittings and equipment

What is the core design element?

Furniture, fittings and equipment, including assistive technology (AT), should be considered, with a focus on robust finishes, robust and adaptable furniture and learning support equipment such as communication devices.

Why is it important?

Adjustable and varied furniture can support different styles of learning and regulation. AT can support participation, independence and communication.

How can it be achieved:

Layout is one of the most effective, low-cost tools for inclusion. Small changes to furniture arrangement can significantly reduce sensory load, improve flow and support regulation.

The rearrangement and adoption of ergonomic, adaptable, and flexible furniture can support comfort, posture and effective learning. Well-chosen furniture and equipment can assist children and young people to regulate, focus and participate fully in learning.

In flexible inclusive environments, furniture supports independence, comfort and engagement for a wide range of physical, sensory and cognitive needs.

Example adaptations for furniture, fittings and equipment

- quiet corners with soft seating to create calm consistency
- benches or planters to form quiet outdoor waiting areas
- furniture with felt pads, glides or castors to reduce scraping noise and allow easy, quiet rearrangement
- a small range of seating options, such as stools, soft seats or footrests, adjustable height desks
- soft seating in calm and quiet space, for example, beanbags, modular seating, or cocoon chairs
- adjustable desks or varied work surface heights to support posture, wheelchair access, and varying energy levels
- natural materials where possible, such as timber, warm laminates, and textured finishes
- reposition existing soft seating, shelving or screens to clearly define activity zones, as shown in Figure 14
- plan outdoor environments as carefully as indoor classrooms, with:
    - a mix of seating and shelters for different sensory needs
    - shaded areas to reduce glare
    - quiet nooks for retreat
    - equipment that supports movement and body awareness

- ensure the environment supports effective use of assistive technology through power outlets, stable Wi-Fi connection, and rooms that are fitted for hearing and induction loops
- use comfortable, non-clinical furniture that can adjust to early years, adolescent and young adult needs
- offer and install evac chairs to support emergency evacuation where applicable and specified as part of an agreed PEEP

Figure 14: Screened, quiet dining option

Applying the inclusive design elements across the phases of education

DfE funding can be used to support inclusive adaptations for early years provision and further education (FE), as well as schools.

As their application varies by phase of education, the case studies in this section illustrate inclusive design adaptations from nursery to FE, showcasing practical examples, highlighting those that make a meaningful difference across different phases of education.

Figures 15 to 17 show inclusive design elements applied across nursery, primary, and secondary or post-16 settings.

Figure 15: Nursery environment

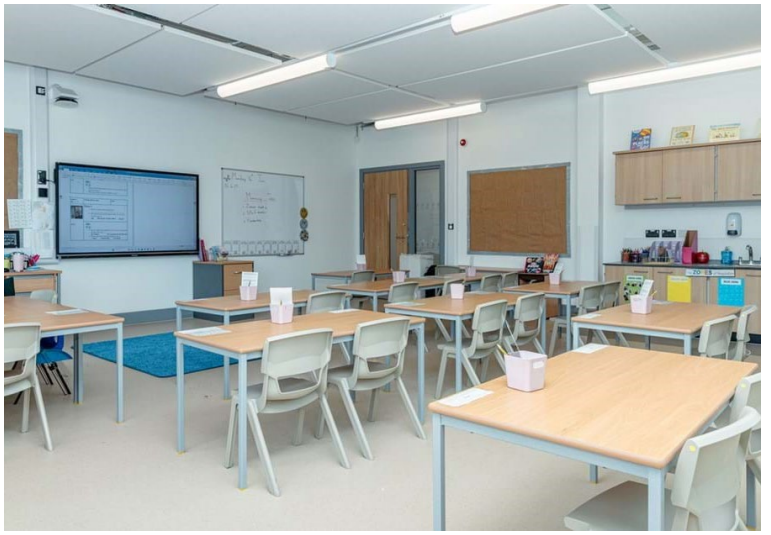

Figure 16: Primary environment

Figure 17: Secondary or Post-16 environment

Example adaptations in early years (0-5yrs)

- remove obstructions to outside views, to connect to nature
- improve acoustics through fire-rated acoustic ceilings or wall baffles and soft furnishings, and by considering equipment use, such as paper towels versus hand dryers
- separate noisy and quiet activity areas
- clearly define activity zones and circulation routes between activities to improve access and spatial clarity
- reduce visual overload, declutter and simplify displays
- consider biophilic design, natural materials and soft colour hues when choosing finished
- create low stimulus quiet corners and quiet spaces, such as a soft-furnished den shown in Figure 18
- create familiar, comfortable spaces, for example, with soft sofa seating, cushions and a rug
- visual and textural cues and Makaton signs to aid comprehension

Sensory and regulation support spaces

- small group room or quiet space for focused support
- multi-sensory rooms for low-level sensory stimulation using controlled dimmable lighting, sound, textures and interactive equipment, supporting specific sensory stimulation needs, or soft play spaces for bouncing
- spaces to support gross motor skills, like walking, running, jumping, balancing and lifting, and regulation

Outdoor spaces

- free-flow play with direct level access to outdoors
- access to nature - plants, trees willow dens, growing areas
- trails, climbing apparatus, and swings, to support regulation and motor skills
- sensory gardens with tactile surfaces, sensory planting, trees, seating, shelter and shade
- small cosy dens to create a quiet space during busy times

Figure 18: Calm zone with natural elements

Example adaptations in primary school (5–11yrs)

Classroom refurbishment

- add calming room colours, declutter surfaces and simplify displays to reduce overload
- use modular storage to reduce clutter and visual distraction
- improve hearing access with speech amplification system
- introduce diffusers for glare-free lighting
- fit acoustic panels
- switch to softer LED lighting

Impact: improved focus and reduced calling out behaviours, especially among pupils with sensory processing, attention and emotional regulation challenges.

New small group and therapy spaces

- repurpose unused rooms for small group work, counselling and SEND support
- equip spaces with soft furnishings and acoustic dividers
- add small areas for movement and calming breaks, such as the quiet reading corner shown in Figure 19
- provide a shared multi-agency meeting room for integrated support

Impact: faster learning progress due to improved acoustics and reduced interruptions.

Outdoor learning and regulation space

- introduce a small forest-school area for sensory-motor play
- zone playground with colour coding to support structure
- add sensory paths and comfortable shaded seating
- provide calm-corner areas for quieter social time
- install inclusive equipment like basket swings and accessible spinners

Impact: reduction in lunchtime incidents, particularly among pupils with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs.

Figure 19: Personalised calm space for breaks

Example adaptations in secondary school (11–16yrs)

Corridor and circulation improvements

- widen walkways to reduce crowding
- add acoustic materials to corridor walls
- colour-code routes to make navigation clearer

Impact: calmer transitions, fewer behaviour incidents.

Regulation hub

- create quiet spaces for short withdrawal periods, as shown in Figure 20, with an enclosed pod for focused study or regulation
- create de-escalation space with soft lighting
- create sensory regulation spaces
- add pastoral rooms for 1:1 emotional support

Impact: fewer escalation events, more time in class.

Redesign of dining and social spaces

- re-arrange dining halls with booth seating and quiet zones
- add acoustic screens and soft-close fittings
- provide shaded outdoor pods for calmer break options.

Impact: increased dining hall use.

Supporting arrival and departure anxiety

- offer a quieter arrival and departure route with a quiet morning room to support transitions
- structure bus queues using zoning, screening and canopies

Impact: better punctuality, reduced morning distress, calmer end of day routines.

Inclusive outdoor areas

- create a multi zone wellbeing terrace with shaded quiet seating, sensory planting and wildlife, small group and social pods, a regulation path with textured surfaces

Impact: outdoor spaces used for safe, calm social interaction and regulation.

Figure 20: Quiet pod for study or regulation

Example adaptations in further education (16–19yrs)

Independent study

- add silent booths, collaboration areas and social study lounges, as shown in Figure 21
- use visual timers, noise monitoring tools and digital regulation supports

Impact: improved concentration and task completion.

Curricular spaces

- install height-adjustable benches in workshop areas
- improve studio lighting and acoustics for clarity and comfort
- introduce tactile wayfinding and high-contrast signage for safety signs and information

Impact: increased accessibility and safer participation.

Wellbeing and regulation areas

- establish smooth transitions to counselling rooms
- add a small sensory-motor route for physical regulation
- use biophilic and low-stim finishes throughout shared spaces

Impact: greater engagement with wellbeing support and reductions in stress related class avoidance.

Supporting arrival and departure anxiety

- build in quiet seating and nature-based regulation spots
- add small-group pods and sheltered outdoor study booths
- create a wellbeing garden for reflective time
- improve pathways, signage and arrival areas for calmer transitions

Impact: students who previously avoided outdoor areas engaged more comfortably with social, study and regulation spaces, improving independence and attendance.

Figure 21: Semi-enclosed booth seating for study and social use

Case studies

The case studies show the implementation of inclusive design at different responsibility levels, from local authorities (LAs) to responsible bodies (RBs) and real-world individual school examples. There are links in the case studies to the preceding sections.

Case Study: knowledge share between specialist and mainstream settings

Lisburne School, Stockport

Project type: special school

Age group: primary

Project context and purpose: Lisburne School is a purpose-built setting for pupils with complex needs, with many features that are transferable to mainstream education.

The school maintains strong links with mainstream partners and the LA, supporting collaboration and shared professional learning. Through joint environment walks, design reviews and peer observations, mainstream colleagues can experience the setting in practice and identify a range of simple, high-impact improvements, including:

- reducing visual clutter and improving acoustics
- calming corridors and transition areas
- introducing compact retreat spaces
- direct access to nature
- equipment such as swings and nooks to aid regulation, as shown in Figures 22 and 23

Impact: by learning from specialists and adopting core design elements, mainstream schools can create calmer, more flexible and inclusive environments.

Figure 22: Indoor spaces with colour and wall designs

Figure 23: Outdoor spaces with colour and equipment

Case Study: 1:1 and sensory spaces

Maltby Learning Trust, Rotherham

Project type: support and sensory rooms

Age group: primary

Project context and purpose: funded through Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's School's Accessibility Capital small grants capital programme, this project supports high needs sufficiency by upgrading inclusive provision in mainstream schools. At Maltby Learning Trust, the objective was to provide enhanced support spaces to re-engage pupils with a range of social, emotional, and mental health needs.

What was delivered:

Unused spaces were repurposed to form:

- support and intervention room for 1:1 and small-group sessions, de-escalation, and school reintegration
- immersive sensory room to support regulation (see Figure 24)

The location of these spaces enables quick access from classrooms for the delivery of 1:1 and small group interventions allowing pupils access to support without needing to leave the main school site.

Impact: support spaces help to facilitate early intervention, de-escalation, calmer transitions, and reintegration into classes.

Figure 24: Immersive sensory room

Case Study: new SEND support classroom

The King's School, Pontefract

Project type: SEND Classroom

Age group: secondary

Project context and purpose: The King's School used £43,500 of high needs provision capital allocation (HNPCA) to develop The Hive, an alternative learning classroom and outdoor area for students with social and emotional needs, alongside other additional support needs. Co-developed with specialist designers and students, the space follows biophilic principles, using natural colours, textures, plants and calming imagery.

What was delivered:

- nature-inspired carpets that help ground the space
- low-maintenance living wall bringing nature indoors, as shown in Figure 25
- custom mural symbolising water and community
- muted colour palette is used to capture nature

Impact: together, these elements create a calm, restorative environment that supports regulation and focused learning. Outside, a nature-rich area offers a space for mindfulness and exploration. This provides a consistent, nurturing pathway for students who benefit from structured environments. Staff report calmer transitions and improved engagement, while students say they feel safer, calmer and more ready to learn.

Figure 25: Nature-inspired classroom and screening

Case Study: creating an inclusive garden

Pinders Primary School, Wakefield

Project type: calm, quiet outdoor space

Age group: primary

Project type and context: Pinders Primary School created a restorative garden to support pupils with autism and sensory seeking behaviours. In 2021–2022, the school secured £10,515 to transform an underused wildlife area into a purposeful, calming outdoor space (as illustrated in Figure 26). A participatory design process involving pupils shaped the final concept, ensuring the environment reflected child-centred design while building a strong sense of ownership and inclusion.

Key adaptations:

- sensory path with varied textures and seating areas
- privacy screens to reduce sensory overload
- edible garden for hands on learning
- calming area with additional screening
- planting offering rich colours, scents and textures

Impact: the garden provides a safe, sensory supportive environment that helps children regulate, feel grounded and re-engage positively with learning.

Figure 26: Calming outdoor space designed by pupils

Case Study: inclusive outdoor spaces

Gainsborough Primary School – Hackney, London

Project type: accessible entrance and landscape upgrades

Age group: primary

Project context and purpose: a phased programme of estate improvements supporting pupils with a variety of needs. Phase 1 enhanced the arrival sequence of the Grade II listed Victorian site through accessible, flexible outdoor spaces.

Key adaptations

- accessible ramp and steps with planters (see Figure 27)
- flexible outdoor spaces for teaching, play and performance
- introducing calm, quiet spaces in the estate
- flexible early years interiors with improved visual connections
- inhabitable fences doubling as play structures (see Figure 28)

Impact: the redesigned entrance creates a more inclusive, welcoming and multifunctional environment that strengthens accessibility, to access nature and learning spaces.

Figure 27: Green and accessible entrance landscape

Figure 28: Traverse on natural fencing

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[32]British Standards Institution. 'BS 6465 - Sanitary installations'

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