

SEND Review: five asks

What do autistic children, young people and their families want?

- To be able to go to school
- To learn while they are there
- To not get excluded
- To feel ok
- To get a job after education

It doesn't seem a lot to ask, does it? As parents or professionals we might ask for 'an excellent education' or for young people to be 'happy'. But autistic young people told us they just want their basic rights. And they're not getting them at the moment.

We want to put the right support in the right places for autistic children and young people. We want to fill the education system with the stuff they need to succeed. We want to make good autism support available for all children at their local school, and create a smoother route to specialist support for those that need it.

That's why we are recommending:

The quality of SEND support becomes a limiting Ofsted judgement

This means you can't get a good or outstanding Ofsted judgement unless your SEND support is good or outstanding. Until all schools see themselves as quality providers of SEND support, autistic children with SEND will be disadvantaged before they even step through the gates for their first open day visit. Ofsted is the only universal accountability system in education. If we're serious about all schools being good SEND schools, it's time to make them properly accountable to Ofsted for the quality of their SEND support.

What young people say:

"There is no inclusivity in many schools in the UK even though autistic students will be present in each establishment. This is wrong and needs to change" Tilly

"I think all schools should have a good understanding of autism and how to support autistic children and I believe this is something that should be monitored when schools are inspected." leuan

Track and publish SEND spending at all levels

We need to know how funding is being used so we can better assess how spending relates to improvements on the ground for autistic children, young people and families.

We know a lot of money goes into the SEND system. And young people and families still describe constant battles and patchy support. Let's properly account for where that money goes, and work out where it makes the most positive difference. Local Authorities, Integrated Care Boards (ICBs)¹, schools, colleges and early years settings should be required to publish their SEND spend and what it was used for annually.

We also need to see revenue funding for SEND – including for health and care - increased to match the new capital funds. There's no point having more specialist school places if we can't pay the skilled staff needed to support the learners in them.

What young people say:

“There is a lot of funding in the system, but it's not being used as well as it could. It's not going to some of the people with lower needs who need it. Autistic kids that don't get EHCPs don't get enough support. Funding and support are patchy, depending on where you live. And you have to fight for it. It's a constant battle.” Georgia

“At my mainstream college I had to get support to help me self-advocate to get the help I was promised at my interview.” Alice

Publish inclusion guidance to sit alongside the exclusion guidance

Autistic pupils are disproportionately at risk of exclusion. We want to stop this. But we've worked on the government's exclusions guidance before, and frankly, by the point exclusion is considered, it's often too late.

Let's stop this risk of exclusion from the start. Let's get it right for those pupils that currently feel the sharp end of the exclusion guidance, by giving schools the tools they need to make all pupils feel that they belong, in the form of inclusion guidance. Government inclusion guidance would set a clear, high-level expectation that including children with SEND is the job of every single school. It would set out ways of working that have been successfully used to include autistic young people in the full life of schools, colleges and their communities, and the wider benefits this brings.

¹ Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) will have responsibility for commissioning NHS health and care services within a geographical area, and be accountable for NHS spend and performance, from April 2022.

What young people say:

“If more education providers were aware of how to support autism and took the time to understand individuals and ensure that actions and plans were put in place more people with autism would get the opportunity to access education and achieve.

“It’s not right there are barriers to people with autism accessing education especially when the majority of the time it’s only small changes that are needed.” Saffron

Strengthen the health and care duties in the Children and Families Act

Families of autistic children who also have a learning disability, sometimes alongside complex health needs, tell us they simply cannot get the social care support they desperately need. From short breaks or respite care to support in the home for children who do not sleep or need round the clock care – the help just isn’t there. Autistic young people with mental health needs tell us they’re moving from a package of support at 17, to suddenly being ‘dropped’ by mental health services on when they turn 18. Getting nothing when they most need support.

The joined-up education, health and care system, that ran from 0-25, was supposed to fix this. It didn’t, because the law doesn’t cover each service equally. It’s time to finish what we started and legislate to fully join up the 0-25 education, health and care system. This would include a specific duty on ICBs to provide the health and care services in an EHC plan, and equal powers for the SEND tribunal in relation to health and care as is has for education.

What young people say:

“EHC plans are too much education. My social care plan is too separate. My college didn’t even think I had a social care plan.” Alice

“I was being prepared for transition and I was just dropped without notice at 18. Psychologists were so unclear with me the whole time. I feel like I just get told I shouldn’t ask for anymore because of the state of the NHS, but that doesn’t help my needs, it doesn’t make them go.” Archie

“Where you leave a special school at 16 all the support goes away overnight. I think CAMHS should go up to 25. I was just getting somewhere and I had to leave. I don’t meet adult mental health criteria and I don’t want to be in adult mental health.” Alice

EHC plans become Employment, Health and Care plans

At the moment we lose all the gains autistic young people make in school and further education, by ending the support of an EHC plan just at the point where they leave education and look for work. We then try very hard to get disabled people 'back into work' through DWP schemes. It doesn't make sense. Let's bridge that gap.

Currently 21.7% of autistic adults are in work, the lowest rate for any group of disabled people. In our survey over 70% of autistic young people said they wanted to work. Creating 0-25 plans was a bold move intended to 'extend the runway' for disabled young people. There's no point having a longer runway if you can't get off the ground. Let's support young people with that final lift, into the world of work.

The Health and Disability Green Paper suggests trialling employment and health support plans as a way to set out the support needed for disabled people to access work. Much of the information for this plan would already be in an EHC plan. Let's pilot a joined-up approach from an EHC plan into an employment and health support plan, to create a bridge into work for autistic young people.

What young people say:

"If autistic people have a next step after education that is well organised and accessible they can then live a life that is purposeful and fulfilled. So many of my friends have ended up unemployed after supported internships. I fell off the end of my supported internship and then there was no support." Patrick

"Practical support would help: writing CVs, life skills. I did a work skills course, with advice on money, tax, what you want to do for a career. The support then followed me into work, with the work experience, and making me comfortable to talk to HR." Georgia