



AMBITIOUS ABOUT **INCLUSION**

A GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTING
THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

JUNE 2026

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THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Centre for Young Lives and Mission 44 are grateful to the many local leaders and young people who presented at our Ambitious About Inclusion events and participated in the workshop discussions, and whose insight, honesty and expertise shaped such rich and constructive discussions. Our thanks go to the Centre for Young Lives's partner Oasis Community Trust for their invaluable role in engaging schools and young people across the country, ensuring their voices were at the heart of this work. We are also hugely appreciative of our partners, The Difference, who supported this series of events.





FOREWORD

Inclusion is often spoken about as a goal, a principle, or a policy priority. But for many young people, it is still not a lived reality.

Too often, the education system continues to treat young people, particularly those facing barriers or disadvantage, as an afterthought. But we are not footnotes. We are at the heart of education, and our experiences should be recognised as such.

This report matters because it brings those experiences together with the insight of teachers, leaders and communities from across the country. It shows not only where the system is falling short, but also what is already working. It highlights that inclusive practice is not an abstract idea, it is something that is already happening in schools and communities every day, often despite wider challenges. If we are serious about delivering the ambitions set out in the Schools White Paper, these insights cannot be ignored.

Experiences of exclusion, in all its forms, are too often met with inconsistent responses, a lack of accountability, and systems that fail to protect the pupils who need this most.

If inclusion is to mean anything, this must change. Schools must adopt clear, trauma-informed approaches that prioritise wellbeing, ensure consistent responses to harm, and create environments where every student feels safe to be themselves. This cannot depend on where a young person lives or which school they attend. It must be a universal expectation.

Inclusion must also be reflected in what we are taught. For many young people, the curriculum does not reflect their identities, experiences or the diversity of the world around them. When certain voices are absent, whether in history, literature or across wider learning, it sends a powerful message about whose knowledge is valued. Representation should not be limited to specific months or moments. It should be embedded throughout the curriculum, so that all young people can see themselves in their education.

Just as importantly, inclusion requires us to rethink how schools respond to behaviour. Too often, discipline systems rely on exclusion rather than understanding. When behaviour is met only with punishment, rather than curiosity and care, it risks pushing young people further away from education.

A more inclusive approach means shifting towards restorative practice, where the focus is on understanding, repairing relationships and supporting young people to remain engaged in education. It also means ensuring that mental health support is not an afterthought, but an integral part of school life, accessible to all students, not just those in crisis.

Ultimately, inclusion is about creating an education system that truly reflects and serves the people within it. This report brings together the voices of young people, educators and communities from across the country who are already working towards that goal. It shows what is possible, and what must change, if we are to build a system where every child can feel seen, valued and able to thrive.

Danielle, 17, pictured below at Ambitious About Inclusion Greater Manchester





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report draws together insights from a national series of ‘Ambitious About Inclusion’ events led by the Centre for Young Lives and Mission 44 to inform the implementation of the government’s Schools White Paper: Every Child Achieving and Thriving. The White Paper recognises that inclusion is not in competition with attainment; it is fundamental to achieving it, this being a position that our attendees strongly believe in. This report highlights what is already working locally, the barriers that remain, and the practical steps needed to support a more inclusive education system.

Across eight events in Greater London, West Yorkshire, the South-West, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, the South-East, the North-East and the West Midlands, nearly 500 people contributed, including young people, schools, trusts, local authorities, health services, youth organisations, community partners, academics, parents and carers.

Insights were gathered through panel discussions, workshops, pledges and surveys, creating space to identify barriers, share effective practice and build momentum for change. The events demonstrated that the expertise, commitment and practice needed to deliver inclusion already exist across the system. The task now is to mobilise this at scale.

Across the events, six key themes emerged:

1 STRONGER FOUNDATIONS: THE AMBITIONS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

Schools need the capacity, guidance and partnerships to intervene earlier, particularly during transitions, to ensure children's needs are met at the right time.

2 CONNECTED SYSTEMS: THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIP AND INTEGRATION IN DELIVERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Inclusion depends on joined-up local systems. Schools, health, local authorities, families and community organisations must work together with clearer roles, better data-sharing and shared pathways of support beyond the school gates.

3 ALIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY WITH INCLUSION

Current accountability systems can work against inclusive practice. Inclusion must be measured, recognised and rewarded alongside attainment.

4 CULTURES OF BELONGING: EMBEDDING INCLUSION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, PRACTICE AND LEADERSHIP

Inclusive education is built through relationships, trust, leadership and culture. Trauma-informed, relational and culturally responsive practice must be embedded in everyday school life.

5 PLACE MATTERS: TAILORING NATIONAL REFORM TO LOCAL CONTEXTS

Local areas face different challenges, from rural isolation to urban deprivation. National reform must allow local flexibility while maintaining clear expectations and equitable access to support.

6 PLACING YOUTH VOICE AT THE HEART OF SYSTEM CHANGE

Young people must be active partners in reform. Their experiences should shape policy, practice, accountability and long-term system learning.

Across the country, the practice, expertise and commitment needed to deliver inclusive education already exist within schools, communities and local networks. However, the current system remains too reactive, fragmented and inconsistent, often limiting the impact of this work. National reform must therefore focus on creating the conditions for inclusive practice to grow and be sustained at scale. Central to this is ensuring that young people are not only heard, but are actively involved in designing and delivering the changes that affect them.



INTRODUCTION

All children deserve to achieve and thrive in education. Yet too many continue to fall through the gaps, facing unmet need, disengagement or exclusion, reflecting a system that is often fragmented, reactive and uneven in how it supports children and families.

The Government has set out a clear ambition in the Schools White Paper, 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving', to place inclusion at the heart of the education system. This marks an important and welcome shift in national policy, with a stronger focus on belonging, early intervention and support within mainstream education. The challenge now is how this ambition can be translated into consistent, meaningful practice in local areas.

In a series of events on inclusive education, the Centre for Young Lives and Mission 44 brought together local leaders, practitioners and young people from across England. They created space to share learning, explore barriers, and identify what is already working in practice. Youth voice was central throughout, with young people shaping discussions and highlighting the realities of the system as they experience it.

Across all regions, it was clear that inclusive approaches are already being developed and delivered locally, often in the face of structural constraints. Schools, trusts, community organisations and local partners are working to build more relational, preventative and inclusive systems, offering valuable insight into how national reform can be implemented effectively.

This report draws on insights from those eight events held across England in 2025 and early 2026. It is intended to support the implementation of the Schools White Paper by grounding national ambition in local experience, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges identified by those working within the system.

The report is structured around six key themes that emerged consistently across the events:

1 STRONGER FOUNDATIONS: THE AMBITIONS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION

2 CONNECTED SYSTEMS: THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIP AND INTEGRATION IN DELIVERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

3 ALIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY WITH INCLUSION

4 CULTURES OF BELONGING: EMBEDDING INCLUSION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, PRACTICE AND LEADERSHIP

5 PLACE MATTERS: TAILORING NATIONAL REFORM TO LOCAL CONTEXTS

6 PLACING YOUTH VOICE AT THE HEART OF SYSTEM CHANGE

Each section follows a consistent structure:

WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS ABOUT THE THEME

WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

**WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE COMMITMENTS IN
THE WHITE PAPER**

Quotes from local leaders, practitioners and young people who attended our events have been woven throughout the report. We also explore the key insights from the pledges made by attendees at each roadshow, reflecting a strong and shared commitment to advancing inclusive education.

This structure is designed to bridge national policy and local delivery, grounding reform in the lived experience of children, young people and those working across the system.

Throughout, we draw on the understanding of inclusion developed by The Difference as part of the Who is Losing Learning Coalition¹: ‘Whole-school inclusion means all staff supporting the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all children, so that they belong, achieve and thrive.’

“

‘When we provide the right support, there is no limit to what our students can achieve.’

**MR STEPHEN LOGAN,
PRINCIPAL,
HEALING ACADEMY HARBOUR
LEARNING TRUST, GRIMSBY**



ABOUT THE AMBITIOUS ABOUT INCLUSION EVENTS

The Ambitious About Inclusion events brought together local leaders, practitioners and young people to explore how more inclusive education systems can be delivered in practice.

The events were designed to share learning, surface effective practice and build collective momentum for change, recognising that while the drivers of exclusion are national, solutions are often shaped by local context. This work builds upon Mission 44's 'Nothing Happens in Isolation' campaign, aimed at supporting students most at risk of exclusion through prevention and early intervention.

Eight events were held across England, reflecting a wide range of local challenges and opportunities, from entrenched deprivation to geographic isolation.

Each event was locally tailored, bringing together stakeholders from across education, local government, health, youth services and the voluntary sector, alongside parents, carers and young people. In total, nearly 500 participants contributed to the discussions.

Events were structured to support both reflection and action, combining:

Panel discussions on national policy and local context, including contributions from young people

Workshops to identify barriers and enablers to inclusion

A pledging process, where attendees committed to practical actions

Based on post-event surveys:

Almost all guests felt the event provided valuable opportunities to connect with relevant individuals and organisations

Almost all guests felt an increased motivation and confidence to take action on inclusive education

Most guests gained insights or problem-solving strategies and made meaningful connections

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‘Today’s discussion around the table was amazing, because there were so many different leaders from different sectors, and they all agreed that the system we have now is so antiquated that we do really need to look at a different system to educate our kids of today.’

**FAY GREAVES,
NSPCC ADVOCATE**



“

‘We owe it to every child to have that opportunity to meet their potential.’

**HEATHER PAUL,
SENIOR LECTURER AND
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
OF THE CENTRE FOR
RACE, EDUCATION AND
DECOLONIALITY,
LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY**

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

NORTH EAST

The overall absence rate is approximately **7.2%** which is **above the national average**.

The suspension rate is **6.7 per 100 pupils** which is **the highest nationally**.

The permanent exclusion rate is **0.08 per 100 pupils** which is also **the highest nationally**.

NATIONAL AVERAGE

The national overall absence rate in the 2024/25 academic year was **6.78%**.

The national suspension rate in spring term 2024/25 is **3.72 suspensions per 100 pupils**.

The national permanent exclusion rate in spring term 2024/25 is **0.04 per 100 pupils**.

WEST YORKSHIRE

The overall absence rate is approximately **7.0%** which is **slightly above the national average**.

The suspension rate is approximately **5.9 per 100 pupils** which is **among the highest nationally**.

The permanent exclusion rate is approximately **0.05 per 100 pupils**.

WEST MIDLANDS

The overall absence rate is approximately **6.9%** which is **slightly above the national average**.

The suspension rate is **3.43 per 100 pupils** which is **among the lowest nationally**.

The permanent exclusion rate is approximately **0.05 per 100 pupils**.

NORTH WEST

The overall absence rate is approximately **7.0%** which is **slightly above the national average**.

The suspension rate is approximately **4.5 per 100 pupils**.

The permanent exclusion rate is approximately **0.07 per 100 pupils** which is **among the highest nationally**.

GREATER LONDON

The overall absence rate is approximately **6.1%** which is **below the national average**.

The suspension rate is **1.80 per 100 pupils** which is **the lowest nationally**.

The permanent exclusion rate is **0.02 per 100 pupils** which is also **the lowest nationally**.

SOUTH WEST

The overall absence rate is approximately **6.7%** which is **close to the national average**.

The suspension rate is approximately **3.9 per 100 pupils**.

The permanent exclusion rate is approximately **0.05 per 100 pupils**.

HAMPSHIRE

The overall absence rate is approximately **6.6%** which is **slightly below the national average**.

The suspension rate is approximately **4.02 per 100 pupils**.

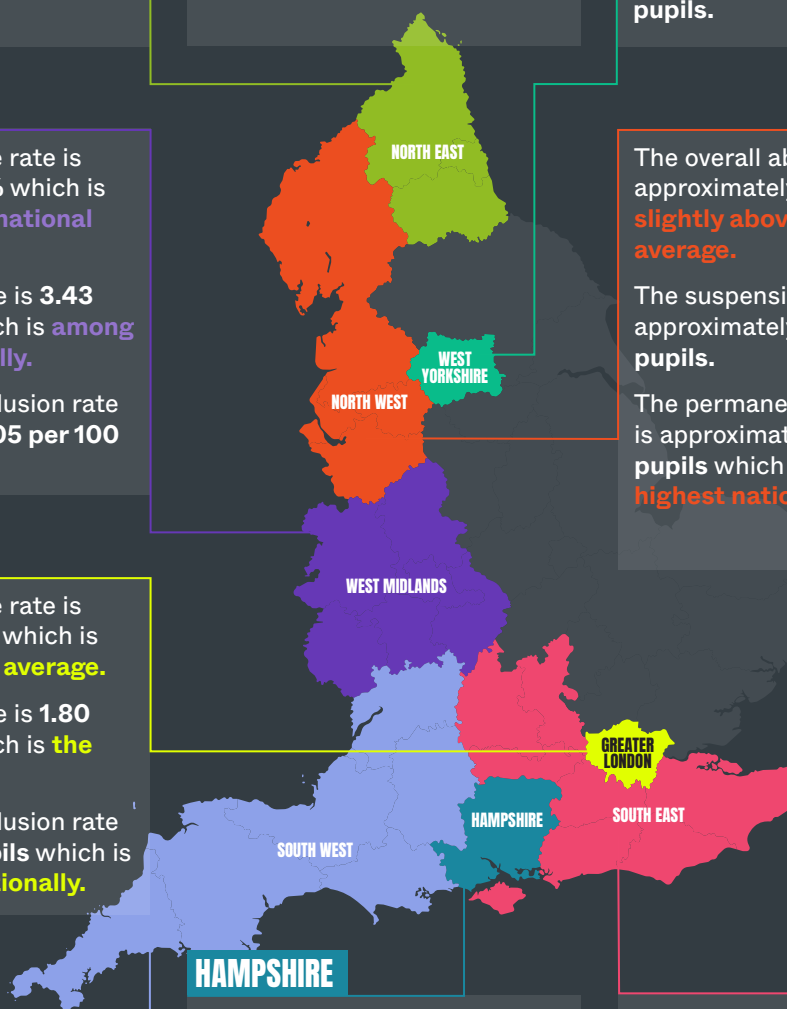
The permanent exclusion rate is **0.02 per 100 pupils** which is **low compared to most regions**.

SOUTH EAST

The overall absence rate is approximately **6.5%** which is **below the national average**.

The suspension rate is approximately **4.0 per 100 pupils**.

The permanent exclusion rate is **0.02 per 100 pupils** which is **among the lowest nationally**.



STRONGER FOUNDATIONS: THE AMBITIONS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION



WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS

The White Paper sets out the government's ambition to ensure children and families receive early, consistent and coordinated support, with services designed to prevent needs from escalating rather than responding at a later crisis point.

This approach begins in the early years, with a set of specific commitments designed to strengthen early identification and joined-up support around children and families. This includes £200m to ensure every Best Start Family Hub has a dedicated SEND practitioner, and additional funding through an Inclusive Early Years Fund to help early years providers identify and respond to emerging needs.

In mainstream education, the White Paper commits to an Inclusive Mainstream Fund of £1.6 billion over three years to help schools identify needs early and put the right support in place, alongside a new £1.8 billion 'Experts at Hand' service, bringing speech and language therapists, educational psychologists and other specialists closer to mainstream settings to enable effective earlier intervention.

The paper explicitly links prevention to improving attendance and strengthening family engagement, setting out a 'support-first' approach, recognising that absence is often an early sign of wider challenges at home or in school. The paper commits to expanding Mental Health Support Teams to every school and college, improving access to early help for children experiencing emotional or mental health difficulties.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

DELAYED INTERVENTION AND SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

Across all regions, a recognition of the central importance of early intervention was made clear. Attendees consistently described a system in which support arrives too late, after needs have escalated, which creates a barrier to delivering mainstream inclusion. In the North-East and West Yorkshire, attendees described long waiting times, unclear referral pathways and uneven access to support, often resulting in a 'postcode lottery' of support. In some areas, attendees described the emergence of a 'referral culture', where children are simply passed between services rather than supported at the right time within their school.

TRANSITIONS AS CRITICAL PRESSURE POINTS

Transitions were repeatedly identified as a key pressure point. In Greater Manchester, attendees described the move from primary to secondary as a stage that can ‘make or break’ a pupil’s school experience, with calls for a longer, more coordinated transition period. Similar concerns were raised in Kent and Portsmouth, where transitions were linked to increased absence, disengagement and unmet need. This concern is reflected in national data. Suspension and exclusion rates are significantly higher in secondary schools than in primary and remain elevated in the early years of secondary education, including Year 7 and Year 8².

RELATIONAL PRACTICE AND FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Attendees also emphasised the importance of relational and personalised approaches. It was felt that a teachers’ ability to intervene early hinges on them being able to develop an understanding of the whole child, including their family context and social and emotional needs, and to build trust over time. We heard across our events that partnership with parents is a cornerstone of inclusive education and integral to understanding the home environment and how it shapes a child’s experience of education. Across regions, staff capacity was therefore frequently cited as a barrier, with limited time to provide the level of individualised engagement and support that children and families need.

Alongside these challenges, examples of effective practice demonstrate what early intervention can look like in practice. At Surrey Square Primary School in Southwark, a whole-family pastoral model has been developed to support children before needs escalate. The school provides integrated support for pupils and their families, including access to family workers, mental health support and community services, all coordinated through the school. This approach enables staff to build a deep understanding of the child’s wider context and respond early to emerging needs, rather than relying on external referrals at a later stage. It also strengthens relationships with families and ensures that support extends beyond the classroom.

A NEED FOR STRONGER MULTI-AGENCY WORKING

Across regions, there was a clear call for stronger multi-agency working to support earlier intervention. Attendees highlighted the need for better coordination between schools, health services, local authorities and the voluntary sector, to ensure that support is available at the right time. The voluntary sector, including grassroots community organisations, were seen as especially effective in engaging young people early and flexibly, particularly where statutory services struggle to do so.



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‘Fundamental change is needed, we need a fully inclusive education system for our young people. Young people growing up in our town boroughs can probably see the skyscrapers from their window, but can they see the paths for themselves to those places? Can they imagine walking in and working in those places? And the truth is; too many don’t.

The old way has completely failed. The Greater Manchester Way will be an ambitious way, it will be an inclusive way, and we’ll back young people all the way through school!’

ANDY BURNHAM, MAYOR OF GREATER MANCHESTER

CASE STUDY

NEWCASTLE UNITED FOUNDATION

In the North-East, organisations such as the Newcastle United Foundation play a key role in engaging young people at risk of disengagement. The Foundation works with schools and communities across the region, using sport as a vehicle to build trust, improve engagement and support wellbeing.

Through its education and community programmes, the Foundation partners with schools to deliver mentoring, enrichment and targeted support, particularly for pupils at risk of exclusion or low attendance. It also provides open-access youth provision, creating safe spaces for young people outside school hours to build relationships and confidence. Its relational and flexible approach enables the Foundation to act as a bridge between young people and formal systems.



WHAT DELEGATES COMMITTED TO

Across regions, delegates committed to strengthening early intervention by:

Improving early identification and support, including reducing reliance on referral processes and responding to need within schools earlier

Strengthening transition support, particularly between primary and secondary, to prevent disengagement and absence

Embedding trauma-informed and relational practice, including staff training and creating safe, supportive environments for children



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

Local areas are already clear on the importance of early identification, relational practice, and joined-up support as set out in the White Paper's ambition for a more preventative system.

To deliver on the White Paper's ambition, several considerations emerge:

- Mainstream schools must be equipped to intervene early.** The government's ambition to strengthen early intervention in mainstream schools is welcome, but some areas still lack the infrastructure required to do so, including limited access to community provision, long waiting times for services such as CAMHS, and weak system integration. Government should provide clear national guidance on how early intervention should operate in practice, including the use of Individual Support Plans and the 'Experts at Hand' offer, alongside targeted support for areas facing workforce and structural challenges. Early intervention will also depend on stronger alignment between education and health. The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care should establish neighbourhood-level plans for early intervention, with clear expectations for Integrated Care Boards to prioritise early support, recognising that SEND reform must be delivered alongside wider neighbourhood health reforms.
- Transitions should be underpinned by strong local partnership and shared accountability.** The focus on improving transitions and strengthening partnerships between early years settings and schools is welcome. Building on this, smoother transitions will require a more systematic, locally accountable approach across all phases of education. Government should support the development of local transition frameworks, bringing together early years, primary, secondary and post-16 providers to share responsibility for continuity of support. This should include strong information sharing, joint planning, and 'warm handovers' for pupils at risk of disengagement. Accountability arrangements should incentivise collaboration across settings, ensuring transitions are a shared local responsibility. Effective transitions will also depend on meaningful engagement with parents and carers. Schools and local partners should be supported to build and sustain relationships with families around key transition points.
- Community partnership is essential in delivering early support.** The White Paper rightly emphasises the importance of partnership, setting out an 'open invitation' for government, schools, families and wider stakeholders to work together in genuine collaboration at both national and community level. Early intervention will only be effective where support extends beyond the school gate and schools work closely with trusted community partners to build relationships with children and families. Community-based provision can play a critical role in engaging young people who may not feel connected to school, offering flexible, relationship-led support that complements formal education. This is reflected in the Youth Strategy's Trusted Adult commitment, which prioritises building consistent, supportive relationships

with young people, though this commitment must prioritise those at risk of exclusion. However, these approaches are not yet consistently embedded or sustainably resourced. To fully realise the Paper's vision, a more systematic role for community organisations is needed within local systems of support. As part of this, the government should pilot youth sector and school partnerships in selected Mission areas and Young Futures areas, adopting a test-and-learn approach to understand how youth provision can strengthen inclusion.

- **Accountability and system incentives must support prevention.** The Schools White Paper recognises that rising standards for all children must be underpinned by a strong, fair and nuanced accountability system that supports excellence, innovation, transparency and continuous improvement. Building on this ambition, accountability and inspection frameworks must go further to explicitly recognise and incentivise early identification of need and preventative practice. Attendees highlighted that current accountability structures often prioritise short-term outcomes which can drive reactive, rather than preventative, practice. This can limit schools' ability to invest in early intervention, relationship-building and multi-agency work.



CONNECTED SYSTEMS: THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIP AND INTEGRATION IN DELIVERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION



WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS

The Schools White Paper recognises that improving outcomes for children requires services to move beyond working in siloes, towards a model of shared responsibility across local systems. It highlights the role of schools as a universal public service and a key anchor within communities but makes clear that they cannot meet children's needs alone.

To support this, the Paper commits to strengthening multi-agency working, including closer collaboration between schools, local authorities, health services and wider partners. This is reflected in proposals such as the 'Experts at Hand' service discussed above, and the expansion of Mental Health Support Teams to every school and college.

The White Paper also sets out a clearer role for local authorities in coordinating provision and ensuring sufficiency, alongside a continued emphasis on collaboration across the school system through trusts and system-led improvement structures such as RISE teams. Together, these proposals signal a shift towards a more connected system, with greater emphasis on shared responsibility and collective accountability.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

PARTNERSHIP AS A KEY ENABLER OF INCLUSION BEYOND THE SCHOOL GATE

Across all regions, attendees emphasised the importance of collaboration and partnership working. In many areas, this was seen as one of the most powerful enablers of inclusion, but also one of the most inconsistent aspects of the current system.

In West Yorkshire, attendees highlighted well-established partnership models such as the Leeds Learning Alliance and Area Inclusion Partnerships. These networks bring together schools across the city to share practice, co-produce approaches and support each other to strengthen inclusion - helping to tackle a range of workforce challenges within the system.

Attendees consistently emphasised the importance of relationships and trust in enabling effective partnership working. Strong collaboration was often driven by local leadership, shared values, and informal networks, rather than by formal structures or system incentives.



Similarly, in Greater Manchester, attendees emphasised the value of deep partnerships across systems, including education, health, social care, youth services and the voluntary and community sector (VCS), with a shared focus on improving outcomes for children and young people. This is reflected in several Greater Manchester-wide partnerships, including the city-region-wide wellbeing and education collaboration through the #BeeWell programme. There was also recognition of the role of combined authorities in coordinating activity, mapping provision, and scaling effective practice across the region.

EMERGING MODELS OF SHARED AND REGIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In Leeds and in Newcastle, attendees proposed a new model of regional accountability, shared by schools, local authorities, and services across a region or locality. Attendees highlighted that regional accountability would strengthen partnership and responsibility and ensure children do not fall through the cracks. Regional accountability and partnership could also help to reduce the risk of practices like off-rolling.

FRAGMENTATION AND THE 'POSTCODE LOTTERY' OF SUPPORT

Attendees consistently described significant fragmentation. In Portsmouth, Kent and the North-East, there were repeated concerns about siloed services, unclear pathways, and inconsistent access to support. Attendees described systems that are difficult for schools and families to navigate, with gaps between education, health and community provision leading to delays and unmet need.

This fragmentation was again experienced as a 'postcode lottery,' with the quality and availability of support varying significantly between areas. In rural and coastal parts of the South-West, geographic isolation and limited local provision further compounded these challenges, making it harder for children and families to access services and opportunities.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGING HEALTH SERVICES

A recurring theme across regions was the challenge of engaging health services as full partners in early intervention. Attendees described difficulties accessing mental health support, with long waiting times, high thresholds and limited capacity within CAMHS, leaving schools to manage complex needs without timely specialist input.

Attendees also highlighted high rates of missed CAMHS appointments, with a lack of data sharing between health services and schools identified as a key contributing factor. Primarily because when schools are unaware of appointments, they are unable to support pupils to attend. More integrated models, including delivering mental health support within schools through embedded mental health teams, were seen as a way to improve access. Providing support in a familiar setting can increase attendance and strengthen coordination between education and health services, with improved data sharing identified as a critical enabler.

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‘Partnership and collaboration between services is essential in allowing our area to flourish.’

**RICHARD PARKER,
WEST MIDLANDS MAYOR**



“

‘Youth clubs provide a safe place for young people to just be.’

**PENNY,
YOUNG PERSON**



CASE STUDY

LEEDS LEARNING ALLIANCE

Leeds Learning Alliance brings together schools across the city to collaborate rather than compete. Through shared professional development, peer-to-peer support, and co-produced approaches to inclusion, the partnership helps schools strengthen early intervention and reduce reliance on exclusion.

Delegates highlighted that this approach builds consistency across schools, strengthens leadership capacity and encourages a shared sense of responsibility for supporting all children, particularly those at risk of exclusion or disengagement.

WHAT DELEGATES
COMMITTED TO

Across regions, delegates committed to building stronger partnerships by:

Developing deeper collaboration between schools, health services, local authorities and community organisations by co-designing new ways of working together

Creating more joined-up pathways of support by working across sectors to reduce fragmentation for families

Strengthening engagement between schools, parents and communities by developing collaborative and empowering approaches



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

Insights from the events demonstrate strong alignment with the White Paper's ambition for a more integrated, partnership-led system. There is a clear appetite across local areas to work more collaboratively, share responsibility for outcomes, and develop joined-up approaches to supporting children and families.

However, they also highlight that effective partnership working is currently variable and often dependent on local relationships, rather than being consistently enabled at a system level.

To deliver on the White Paper's ambition, several considerations emerge.

- Government and local partners must put in place the practical conditions needed for integration to work.** This means establishing shared data systems that allow partners to identify needs early, agreeing clear referral pathways between education, health and children's services, and protecting time for professionals to plan and work together across agencies. Pride in Place³ funding should be used to pilot ambitious new programmes of integration. This should be supported by learning from shared data systems through Connected Bradford⁴, and the Growing Up Well model⁵ in Humber and North Yorkshire.
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities are critical.** While the White Paper sets out a stronger role for local authorities and partners, implementation will require clearly defined multi-agency partnerships at a local level. This should be supported by cross-departmental guidance and strategy at a national level, and should bring together education, local authorities, health services (including mental health and speech and language support) and voluntary and community organisations.
- National ambition must be tailored locally.** Local areas should be supported to align funding streams, adapt commissioning arrangements, and design support models that reflect local demographics, geography, levels of deprivation and existing service capacity.
- Parents are partners in inclusive education.** Attendees made it clear that partnership with parents is a cornerstone of inclusive education and integral to understanding the home environment and how this impacts a child's life at school. That's why the White Paper's commitment to 'minimum expectations' for home-to-school partnerships is welcome. For many schools there is a long way to go towards meaningful partnership. The government's transition plan towards minimum expectations should be supported by clear principles and stipulations, good practice examples, and engaging parent champions to co-produce these reforms and to measure their effective implementation.

The White Paper provides a strong foundation for a more integrated system. The challenge will be to ensure that collaboration is not left to chance, but is embedded, supported and expected across all parts of the system.



ALIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY WITH INCLUSION



WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS

The current accountability system, weighted toward attainment, incentivises the marginalisation of children who need additional support. The White Paper sets out an ambition to move towards a system of collective responsibility, where schools, trusts and local partners share accountability for improving outcomes for all children.

This is reflected in several proposals. The White Paper strengthens the role of multi-academy trusts in driving school improvement and holding schools to account for performance, alongside the development of system-led structures such as RISE teams to support improvement across local areas. It also places greater emphasis on collaboration between schools and local partners, linking accountability more closely to system-wide outcomes.

The paper also signals a shift towards a broader definition of success. Alongside attainment, it highlights the importance of attendance, inclusion and pupil wellbeing, and introduces a more support-led approach to attendance, recognising absence as an indicator of wider need.

The new Ofsted framework has already taken a step towards this approach, by adding inclusion as a measure. However, early perspectives on the new Ofsted framework suggest that it may not be as effective as intended, and a more fundamental shift is necessary.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

ACCOUNTABILITY AS A BARRIER TO INCLUSION

Across all regions, accountability was identified as a key barrier to inclusion. Attendees consistently highlighted that current accountability structures can create perverse incentives, by encouraging schools to prioritise short-term performance measures over inclusive practice. In practice, this can lead to behaviours that work against inclusion, including off-rolling, informal exclusions, and the management of admissions in ways that limit the intake of pupils with additional needs.

A NARROW DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

Attendees shared how the current system places disproportionate emphasis on attainment and inspection outcomes, often at the expense of wellbeing, belonging and inclusion. In several regions, it was suggested that schools can feel pressured to manage performance data in ways that do not always align with inclusive practice, for example off-rolling pupils with more complex needs to protect performance data averages.

Some attendees also highlighted a lack of clarity around how inclusion is assessed within Ofsted's new inspection frameworks. Some felt that it is not consistently or sufficiently weighted, and that schools are not always recognised or praised for inclusive practice. An independent wellbeing report, commissioned by Ofsted, has also found stakeholders were concerned the new framework would worsen the use of practices around "selection at the point of entry to a school".

There were also calls for a broader definition of 'success' in education that goes beyond exam results. Attendees emphasised the importance of also recognising outcomes such as wellbeing, engagement, belonging and preparation for adulthood.

THE TENSION BETWEEN ACCOUNTABILITY AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

In Greater Manchester, young people and practitioners highlighted the tension between accountability pressures and inclusive practice. One young person described a system that prioritises ‘impressing Ofsted’ over supporting pupils to thrive, reflecting wider concerns that schools can feel driven to focus on performance metrics rather than early intervention and wellbeing.

This suggests that in areas facing greater pressure, schools may be more likely to rely on exclusion as a response to unmet need, particularly where accountability systems prioritise attainment and behaviour outcomes over inclusion. In West Yorkshire and the South-West, higher rates of exclusion and absence were linked not only to levels of need, but also to system pressures, including accountability expectations and limited capacity to intervene early. In parts of West Yorkshire, suspension rates are up to 1.9 times the national average, while in the South-West, permanent exclusions in some areas are 77% higher than the national rate.



‘League tables rank schools without acknowledging the challenges some communities face. The system rewards outcomes but rarely accounts for inequality in opportunity.’

**OSOB,
YOUNG PERSON**

WHAT DELEGATES COMMITTED TO

Across regions, delegates committed to reshaping accountability by:

Challenging existing measures of success, including advocating for inclusion, wellbeing and belonging to be valued alongside attainment

Reviewing and adapting school policies and practices, including behaviour, attendance and curriculum, to better support inclusion

Sharing and scaling effective practice, including using pupil engagement data, alongside collaboration and evidence-sharing, to strengthen inclusive accountability and drive system-wide improvement



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

The White Paper sets out a clear ambition to create a more inclusive system, but delivering this ambition will depend on aligning accountability frameworks with inclusive practice.

Several considerations emerge:

- Inclusion should be a fundamental principle of accountability, not an add on.** The introduction of inclusion within the new Ofsted framework is a welcome step towards a more balanced system. Building on this, inclusion should be embedded as a core design principle of accountability, shaping how success is defined and measured. This requires moving beyond narrow performance measures to a more holistic understanding of outcomes, with indicators such as belonging, wellbeing, engagement and successful transitions considered alongside attainment. Inspection should assess inclusive practice against clear, nationally defined expectations, including how schools deliver early intervention, relational approaches and support for vulnerable pupils. Ensuring these are consistently and robustly reflected in inspection outcomes will be critical to embedding inclusion and driving sustained system-wide improvement.
- Lost learning should be measured by the Department for Education and by Ofsted.** This should include improvements in our measurement across a range of forms of Lost Learning which have been less visible, including stronger accountability for off-rolling and measures of “self-exclusion”. The Department for Education should also establish a live school roll, enabling more effective tracking of pupil movement and improving accountability for practices such as off-rolling, informal exclusion and ‘selection at the point of entry’, through which vulnerable pupils may be discouraged from joining mainstream settings.
- Collective accountability must be clearly defined and tested.** While the White Paper emphasises shared responsibility across systems, there is a need for clarity on how accountability will be distributed between schools, trusts, local authorities and partners in practice. This should support a system where responsibility for vulnerable pupils is shared, rather than concentrated within individual institutions. The Department for Education should pilot a new system of local, collective accountability in a number of areas.
- A Measure of Wellbeing.** We heard across events about the impact of measuring wellbeing, supporting calls for a mandatory wellbeing measure.

The White Paper provides an important opportunity to reset accountability in support of inclusion. However, without changes to how success is measured and assessed, there is a risk that the current system will continue to drive behaviours that are at odds with the ambition to ensure every child achieves and thrives.

CULTURES OF BELONGING: EMBEDDING INCLUSION THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS, PRACTICE AND LEADERSHIP



WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS

The White Paper sets out a clear ambition to build an education system where inclusion is the norm, and where children with additional needs are supported effectively within mainstream settings. It includes plans to strengthen inclusion through earlier identification of need, greater access to specialist expertise, and investment in workforce capability.

Alongside these structural reforms, the White Paper highlights the importance of high-quality teaching and inclusive practice, supported by strengthened professional development and workforce investment. It signals a continued focus on improving Continued Professional Development for teachers and leaders, helping staff to respond effectively to a wider range of pupil needs within mainstream classrooms. This reflects a broader direction towards building workforce capability so that inclusion can be delivered more consistently through everyday practice.

The White Paper also places emphasis on leadership and system capacity, recognising that school leaders play a critical role in shaping school culture, setting expectations and embedding effective practice across whole-school systems. This includes strengthening leadership development and enabling schools and trusts to collaborate and share expertise.

In addition, the paper points towards the importance of ensuring the workforce reflects and supports the communities it serves, highlighting the role that a representative and inclusive workforce can play in supporting pupil belonging and engagement.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

WORKFORCE DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION

In London in particular, the importance of workforce diversity in building trust and belonging was strongly emphasised. London has the most diverse pupil population in the country, yet also the largest gap between the ethnic profile of pupils and the teaching workforce. The high cost of living in London was identified as a barrier to recruiting and retaining teachers from diverse backgrounds, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In Birmingham, the importance of culturally responsive practice and representative leadership was similarly emphasised, reflecting the city's significantly diverse pupil population. Though of course, these factors are just as important in less diverse areas.

BELONGING AS THE FOUNDATION OF INCLUSION

Across all regions, it was consistently highlighted that inclusive education is realised both at a system level and through the culture and individual relationships within schools that foster a sense of belonging for pupils. Attendees emphasised that inclusive practice depends on children feeling known, safe, valued and understood, and that this requires strong relationships, culturally responsive practice and inclusive school cultures. Across all regions, belonging was described as needing to extend beyond individual interventions to whole-school culture, including inclusive leadership, strong relationships with families, and a shared set of values across staff.

RELATIONAL AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

Across regions, there was also a strong focus on trauma-informed and relational practice. The negative impact of trauma, family circumstances and unmet need on engagement and behaviour was highlighted, alongside the importance of personalised support, safe spaces and trusted relationships.

In Kent, schools described adopting trauma-informed and relational approaches to support pupils with complex needs, including the use of Individualised Support Plans, one-to-one pastoral relationships, and dedicated safe spaces for pupils experiencing anxiety or emotional distress. Attendees emphasised that understanding the wider context of a child's life, including family circumstances and social and emotional needs, is critical to preventing disengagement and exclusion.



INCLUSION AND THE CURRICULUM

Attendees identified a narrow or limiting curriculum as a barrier to inclusion. They emphasised the importance of designing a curriculum shaped by student voice, giving young people greater agency in what and how they learn. This was seen as critical to fostering engagement, particularly for pupils who may feel disconnected from traditional academic pathways. There were calls for curricula that are more relevant, flexible and reflective of pupils' interests, identities and future aspirations. Participants highlighted the importance of creating space within the curriculum for young people to pursue their own interests, develop a sense of ownership over their learning, and experience education as meaningful and motivating. The Real LiFE Curriculum was highlighted as an example of good practice, equipping pupils with the knowledge, skills and values needed for the 21st century, while supporting personal development alongside academic learning.

SYSTEM RIGIDITY AS A BARRIER

The tension between inclusive practice and system rigidity was also raised. In Portsmouth, it was noted that prescriptive approaches to curriculum, behaviour and attendance can limit flexibility to respond to a pupil's individual needs.

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‘There are too many children who are being let down and left behind, who are leaving school without the qualifications, or the mental-health or the belief in themselves.’

**PIPPA SADGROVE,
TRUST SENIOR VICE PRINCIPAL,
DIXONS ACADEMIES TRUST**



“

‘As this report showcases, inclusion works best when it is woven into the fabric of everyday school life. When it’s built on strong relationships, high expectations and a deep commitment to every child’s uniqueness and potential.

Across Oasis academies, inclusion means knowing our students well. It means responding early when they need extra support and working alongside their families and communities to remove barriers to learning. As the Government looks to implement the findings of the Schools White Paper, there is a real opportunity to learn from these inclusive approaches and ensure the system supports schools to do what they do best-enabling every young person to belong, thrive and succeed.’

JOHN BARNEBY, CEO OF OASIS COMMUNITY LEARNING

CASE STUDY

CARR MANOR COMMUNITY SCHOOL (LEEDS)

Carr Manor demonstrates how whole-school culture can underpin inclusive practice. The school has embedded a relational approach across all aspects of its work, with a strong focus on belonging, restorative practice and inclusive leadership.

This includes prioritising relationships between staff and pupils, investing in pastoral support, and creating a culture where behaviour is understood in the context of need rather than simply sanctioned. This whole-school approach supports early identification of need and reduces reliance on exclusion, illustrating how inclusive values can be translated into everyday practice.



WHAT DELEGATES COMMITTED TO

Across regions, delegates committed to strengthening inclusive cultures by:

Building school environments where every child feels seen, safe and valued, including ensuring each child has a trusted adult

Challenging discrimination and promoting anti-racist and inclusive practice, including curriculum and workforce diversity

Embedding relational approaches, prioritising connection, understanding and individual needs over purely behavioural responses



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

The White Paper provides a strong foundation for improving access to support and building capacity in mainstream settings. However, delivering its ambition for inclusion will also depend on addressing the cultural and relational factors highlighted across the regions.

Several considerations emerge:

- **Inclusion must be embedded in whole-school culture.** The White Paper's commitment to developing safe, inclusive cultures that foster belonging is a strong foundation. This means embedding inclusion in the structures, routines and relationships that shape pupils' experiences. Schools should prioritise relationship-building through approaches such as trusted adult models and behaviour policies should reflect relational and restorative approaches. Whole-school systems, including pastoral structures and the use of wellbeing data, should reinforce this approach so that inclusive practice is embedded across the whole school and experienced consistently by all pupils.



- **The importance of cultural and relational practice must be explicitly prioritised.** The White Paper commits to strengthening Continued Professional Development for teachers and leaders and building workforce capacity to meet a wider range of pupil needs within mainstream settings. Implementation should ensure this training explicitly supports trauma-informed, relational and culturally responsive practice. Across regions, we heard from a wide range of schools and practitioners already delivering highly effective inclusive practice. Government should harness this expertise to shape and deliver workforce development, ensuring that effective approaches are grounded in practice and scaled across the system.
- **Workforce diversity and inclusive leadership must be strengthened.** The White Paper commits to research through the Race Equality Unit on improving recruitment, retention and progression of the ethnic minority teaching workforce. To realise meaningful change, this work should build on what we already know, including research by the National Foundation for Educational Research, rather than duplicating it. Recent NFER analysis highlights that disparities occur across the full teacher pipeline, including entry into training, retention and progression to leadership, and that addressing these gaps could significantly improve both workforce diversity and overall teacher supply⁶. Attendees emphasised that building trust and a sense of belonging depends on staff and leaders who reflect the communities they serve. Implementation should therefore focus on translating this evidence into clear, actionable reforms, including more representative recruitment practices, equitable progression pathways, and culturally responsive leadership.
- **Policy implementation should enable schools to respond flexibly to need.** Attendees highlighted that prescriptive approaches to behaviour, curriculum and attendance can restrict schools' ability to support pupils with complex needs. This requires enabling relational and graduated responses to behaviour, alongside flexibility in how support is delivered, including restorative approaches and adapted timetables where needed to keep pupils engaged. This will require accountability, guidance and funding frameworks that actively support flexibility in practice.

PLACE MATTERS: TAILORING NATIONAL REFORM TO LOCAL CONTEXTS



WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS

The White Paper recognises that improving outcomes for children requires a stronger focus on place, with education reform being delivered through effective local systems. It sets out a clearer role for local authorities and partners in coordinating provision, alongside a renewed emphasis on leadership and accountability for local systems.

This is reflected in several proposals. The White Paper commits to strengthening local collaboration through structures like RISE teams, designed to support school improvement and facilitate system-wide working across trusts and local partners. It also emphasises the role of local authorities in ensuring sufficiency of provision, and in coordinating services across education, health and care.

The paper sits alongside wider place-based initiatives, including Mission Coastal and Mission North-East, which recognise that some regions face entrenched and overlapping challenges linked to deprivation, geography and access to opportunity. These initiatives aim to bring together government departments, local systems and communities to address place-specific barriers.

However, while the White Paper acknowledges the importance of place and local systems, it provides limited detail on how national reforms will be adapted to reflect the variation in experience, need and capacity across local areas.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

VARIATION IN LOCAL CONTEXT AND NEED

Attendees repeatedly emphasised that place matters. The challenges facing children and families, and the capacity of local systems to respond, vary significantly between and within regions.

In the South-West, we heard particularly how rural and coastal communities face specific challenges, including geographic isolation, limited access to services, and lower attainment among disadvantaged pupils. Persistent and severe absence rates are higher than the national average, with some areas recording severe absence up to 1.57 times the national rate.

In the North-East, persistent absence stands at 22.1% compared to 20% nationally, with suspension rates 63% higher than the national average and permanent exclusion rates almost double. These challenges are compounded by economic disadvantage and further barriers to accessing services, including local provision, transport constraints, and the cost and accessibility of services.

In Greater Manchester, 37% of children are living in poverty, which intersects with higher exclusion rates, and places additional pressure on schools and local services.

THE 'POSTCODE LOTTERY' OF PROVISION

Again, attendees described a 'postcode lottery' in access to support, with the quality and availability of services varying significantly between areas. In Kent and the South-East, variation within regions was also highlighted, with differences in provision between localities creating inconsistent experiences for children and families.

LOCALLY DRIVEN LEADERSHIP AND SOLUTIONS

There was significant appetite across the events for local leaders to develop local solutions to drive inclusive education. In West Yorkshire, collaborative models such as 'Area Inclusion Partnerships' and 'School Clusters' were described as responses to local patterns of need. In Greater Manchester, the Combined Authority's role in coordinating activity was seen as critical in addressing challenges linked to scale and deprivation. Across regions, attendees emphasised that effective solutions are locally designed, reflecting the specific needs and assets of the community.



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‘We need to start thinking about schools at the heart of inclusive communities.’

**JONNY UTTLEY,
VISITING FELLOW AT THE CENTRE
FOR YOUNG LIVES AND FORMER
CEO OF THE EDUCATION ALLIANCE**

“

‘This is exactly why inclusion in schools is so vital. It is not just a buzzword; it is the heartbeat of a healthy community.’

**HARRY,
YOUNG PERSON**

CASE STUDY

LONDON'S SYSTEM-WIDE APPROACH TO INCLUSION

London was highlighted as a strong example of place-based success, with higher attainment and lower exclusion rates compared to the national average. This has been linked to sustained, system-wide approaches such as the London Challenge and more recent initiatives including the London Inclusion Charter.

The London Challenge (2003-2011) took a place-based approach to school improvement, focusing on collaboration across boroughs. A key feature was school-to-school support, with strong schools and experienced leaders working directly with those facing challenges. This partnership-led model helped build trust, reduce competition and strengthen shared responsibility for pupils.

More recently, the London Inclusion Charter, developed by London's Violence Reduction Unit, builds on these principles with a specific focus on inclusion. The Charter supports schools to adopt inclusive, preventative approaches by setting out shared commitments around reducing exclusions, strengthening early intervention, and improving support for pupils at risk of disengagement. It is accompanied by targeted funding and support for schools and partnerships across London, including work in alternative provision and pupil referral units.

Together, these approaches demonstrate how sustained collaboration, strong leadership and collective accountability can support both attainment and inclusion at scale. They also highlight the importance of long-term, place-based investment and shared commitments across local systems in driving lasting change.

WHAT DELEGATES COMMITTED TO

Across regions, delegates committed to recognising the importance of place by:

Designing provision that reflects local community need, including poverty, access to services and demographic context

Strengthening local networks and place-based partnerships, including working with voluntary and community sector organisations

Improving access to support and opportunities, particularly for underserved or marginalised groups



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

The White Paper provides a framework for strengthening local systems and accountability. However, the evidence from local areas highlights that successful implementation will depend on how well national reforms reflect and respond to local variation.

Several considerations emerge:

- National policy must be adaptable to local context.** The White Paper's investment in the Inclusive Mainstream Fund is a welcome step in giving schools greater flexibility to plan proactively and respond to need. Building on this, implementation must enable local partners to design responses that reflect the very different challenges faced across areas—from rural isolation to urban deprivation. This includes recognising structural barriers such as transport and access to services and ensuring funding frameworks reflect place-based need to support equitable access to provision. At the same time, local flexibility must sit alongside clear minimum standards, shared principles and common outcomes, so that all children and families receive consistent support regardless of where they live.
- Place-based approaches should be central to delivering education reform.** Programmes such as Mission Coastal, a targeted education programme intended to improve outcomes for young people in coastal communities, demonstrate how cross-government, place-based initiatives can address wider barriers to inclusion. Government should build on these models by adopting a place-based approach to implementing the Schools White Paper, enabling local areas to align education reform with wider services and tailor delivery to local need. Mission areas should be prioritised as test beds for reform, with targeted investment to support the implementation of key initiatives such as the upcoming Pupil Engagement Framework and workforce diversity programmes.
- Local system leadership must be strengthened.** Effective place-based working depends on strong local leadership, with well-defined roles, responsibilities and expectations for local authorities, trusts and partners in coordinating provision and driving improvement. Government should strengthen system leadership through RISE teams, ensuring they have the capacity and remit to support collaboration across services and coordinate local responses to inclusion.

The White Paper recognises the importance of place, but the challenge for implementation will be to support genuinely place-based approaches that respond to local need while maintaining national ambition and standards.



PLACING YOUTH VOICE AT THE HEART OF SYSTEM CHANGE



WHAT THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER SAYS

The White Paper recognises the importance of pupil engagement and wellbeing as part of a more inclusive education system. It places greater emphasis on attendance, behaviour and mental health, including a shift towards a more support-led approach to attendance, recognising absence as an early indicator of wider need.

However, while the White Paper emphasises engagement and wellbeing as outcomes, it places relatively limited emphasis on the role of young people as active partners in shaping the education system. There is little explicit focus on how pupil voice will be systematically embedded in decision-making at school, local or national level, or how young people will be involved in designing and delivering the reforms set out in the paper.



WHAT WE HEARD FROM LOCAL AREAS

YOUTH VOICE AS A DRIVER OF INCLUSION

Across all regions, youth voice emerged as a central theme, described consistently as an integral driver of inclusive practice. Young people were not only contributors to the discussions, but powerful advocates for change. They consistently highlighted that meaningful engagement with young people is critical to understanding need, designing effective support, and building a sense of belonging within schools.

Across regions, the #BeeWell programme was highlighted as a strong example of how large-scale wellbeing data, gathered directly from young people, can be used to inform local decision-making and shape support.

In the North-East, young people spoke about the importance of being listened to and taken seriously. Many described feeling that ‘decisions were made about them, not with them,’ and called for more meaningful and consistent opportunities to shape their own experiences of education.



FROM PARTICIPATION TO CO-PRODUCTION

Across regions, there was a clear distinction between tokenistic engagement and meaningful participation. Young people emphasised that being asked for their views is not enough; they want to see those views reflected in action and change. Youth voice was also directly linked to improved outcomes. Attendees highlighted that when young people feel heard and involved, they are more likely to attend school, engage in education and develop a sense of belonging.

However, attendees also highlighted that current approaches to youth engagement do not always capture the full diversity of young people's experiences. Traditional mechanisms, such as school councils, can often reflect the views of more confident, engaged or higher-attaining pupils, while those at greater risk of exclusion or disengagement are less likely to be heard. This creates a risk that 'youth voice' is not fully representative of the pupils most affected by the issues being discussed.

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‘We don’t just need a seat at the table like we’ve all had today; we need to redesign the room so that the impact we have goes much further.’

**BRAYAN,
YOUNG PERSON**



CASE STUDY

#BEEWELL EMBEDDING YOUTH VOICE AT SCALE

#BeeWell brings together schools, local authorities and health partners across Greater Manchester to gather and respond to pupil wellbeing data. By placing young people's experiences at the centre of decision-making, the programme enables earlier identification of need and more targeted, locally responsive support. The insights generated through #BeeWell are used by schools and local partners to inform priorities and shape responses to emerging challenges, including approaches to wellbeing, attendance and support for vulnerable pupils. This enables schools and systems to respond more effectively to the needs identified by young people themselves.



WHAT DELEGATES COMMITTED TO

Across regions, delegates committed to centring youth voice by:

Embedding young people's voices in decision-making, ensuring they shape school practice, policy and provision

Creating more opportunities for co-production, including working alongside young people to design inclusive approaches

Actively listening to and amplifying underrepresented voices, particularly those most at risk of exclusion



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SCHOOLS WHITE PAPER

The White Paper sets out a clear ambition to improve inclusion, wellbeing and engagement. However, the insights from local areas highlight that achieving this will depend on the extent to which young people are actively involved in shaping and delivering reform.

Youth voice must therefore be understood as a central driver of change, not a supplementary feature. It is through listening to, engaging with, and co-producing solutions alongside young people that schools and systems can design approaches that are responsive, effective and sustainable.

Embedding youth voice within the implementation of the White Paper will be critical to translating national ambition into meaningful change on the ground.

Several considerations emerge:

- **Youth voice must be embedded as a core part of system design.** The White Paper rightly emphasises that the voices of children should be at the heart of decision-making. To realise this ambition in practice, consistent and meaningful structures for pupil participation are needed at school, local and national level, ensuring young people are actively involved in shaping policy and practice. This should include consideration of formal mechanisms, such as a Department for Education Youth Advisory Board, to ensure that young people's lived experience directly informs national decision-making.
- **There should be a long-term, systematic approach to capturing young people's views.** This should include regular, nationally coordinated surveys to track how pupils think, feel and respond to change over time. This would enable government and local systems to better understand emerging needs, evaluate the impact of reforms, and ensure that policy remains responsive to the lived experience of children and young people.
- **Engagement must move beyond consultation to co-production.** Young people should be supported to work alongside schools, local partners and policymakers to design solutions, particularly in areas such as behaviour, attendance and wellbeing.
- **Youth voice should be recognised within accountability frameworks.** If engagement and belonging are priorities, systems should assess how effectively schools listen to and act on the views of young people.
- **Participation must be inclusive.** Attention should be given to ensuring that the voices of marginalised and underrepresented groups are heard, including those at risk of exclusion or disengagement. The upcoming Pupil Engagement Framework must consider how to do this outside of the usual, often misrepresentative, school councils.

The events demonstrate that young people are not only willing, but are ready, to contribute to shaping a more inclusive education system. However, without their active involvement, there is a risk that the reforms set out in the White Paper will fail to fully address the realities of pupils' experiences.



CONCLUSION

The Schools White Paper sets out a clear and ambitious vision: an education system where every child can achieve and thrive. The insights from the Ambitious About Inclusion events demonstrate that this is achievable, and that across the country, schools, trusts, local authorities, community organisations and young people are already putting inclusion into practice. In many cases, this work is happening despite significant structural barriers, rather than because of the system as it currently operates.

What these events make clear is that inclusion is not a single reform, but a whole-system endeavour. Delivering on the White Paper's ambition will require a sustained focus on several interconnected conditions. Early intervention must become the norm, with support provided before needs escalate. Systems must be more connected, with education, health and wider services working together, not in siloes. Inclusion must be embedded in the culture of schools, through relationships, leadership and everyday practice that nurture belonging. Accountability must be aligned with inclusion, so that what is valued and measured supports, rather than undermines, inclusive practice. National reform must be responsive to place, recognising the different challenges and opportunities across communities. And critically, young people must be recognised as active partners in shaping the system.

Across all regions, there was a clear sense not only of ambition, but of existing expertise and innovation. Attendees described the ways in which schools are already working together to

share responsibility for pupils, community organisations are building trusted relationships with young people and families, and practitioners are embedding relational and preventative approaches in their daily work.

Insights and pledges from attendees point to three clear signals about the current system. Firstly, the will to deliver inclusion already exists, with leaders and practitioners acting now rather than waiting for national direction. Secondly, that innovation is happening across the country, but is often unevenly connected, creating a clear opportunity to better share and scale what works. Thirdly, that the barriers to progress are structural, not motivational, with fragmentation, capacity constraints and misaligned incentives continuing to limit impact.

The White Paper provides a welcome and promising framework, and the events reveal a powerful network of leaders, practitioners and young people who are ready and willing to turn that ambition into reality. By backing this collective effort, there is a clear opportunity to move away from the current postcode lottery of support, and to build an education system where inclusion is not recognised as in tension with attainment, but fundamental to achieving it.

Mobilising existing inclusive practice at scale will require creating the conditions for it to grow by sharing what works, investing in capacity, strengthening local networks, and aligning accountability and incentives with inclusion. To deliver on the Schools White Paper, government must embed inclusion as a core principle across all aspects of implementation, ensuring that policy, funding and accountability consistently support inclusive practice. This includes scaling the approaches and partnerships that are already working across the system, rather than creating new initiatives in isolation, and systematically embedding youth voice in how reform is designed and delivered. While national policy has a critical role to play in providing clarity and support, the system itself is made up of the people and partnerships seen throughout these events. It is through connecting, enabling and trusting in these local actors that change will be realised.

REFERENCES

¹ The Who is Losing Learning? Coalition was founded to identify and address the scale and impact of children losing learning in England and highlight the injustice of its disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged or marginalised young people

² Release home - Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

³ A government programme that will see up to £5 billion given to nearly 250 areas across the UK. Each area will receive up to £20 million over the next 10 years to make long-term improvements that local residents want.

⁴ A data set containing linked health and other associate data from 7 million patients.

⁵ A place-based, outcomes-led model focused on improving children and young people's mental health- developed by Centre for Young Lives in partnership with Humber and North Yorkshire ICB.

⁶ Study suggests tackling ethnic disparities in teacher workforce could help solve recruitment and retention crisis - NFER

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