

Supporting neurodivergent pupils in mainstream schools

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POLICY CONTEXT

England's SEND system is experiencing sustained pressure, with more neurodivergent pupils educated in mainstream schools alongside rising workforce strain, increased absence and exclusion risk, and worsening wellbeing for some pupils. Current reforms and strategies acknowledge the scale of the problem, but implementation often relies on diagnosis-led access to support and short-term measures that do not change everyday conditions in classrooms and social spaces. Evidence from schools suggests inclusion is frequently treated as an "add-on" rather than built into school design, workforce development and accountability.

RESEARCH

This briefing synthesises evidence from four recent studies examining (1) outcomes and mechanisms of specialist resource provision in mainstream schools and (2) staff experiences, training, stress and self-efficacy in supporting neurodivergent pupils in mainstream settings. Together, these studies provide practice-facing evidence on what improves attendance, engagement and belonging, and what constrains inclusion even when policy intentions are strong.

ADVICE

Policy efforts to stabilise SEND will not deliver sustainable inclusion unless reforms address the conditions that enable mainstream schools to work for neurodivergent pupils. These include: strengthening school-based specialist infrastructure; shifting workforce development from one-off training to sustained, experiential learning; designing flexible curriculum access and sensory accessibility; and aligning accountability with belonging, wellbeing and life readiness alongside attainment.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Across four studies, we found that outcomes for neurodivergent pupils depend on whether schools can provide predictable environments, trusted relationships and embedded expertise within day-to-day practice.

Staff are committed to inclusion, but many lack the time, resources and consistent training needed to feel confident and to implement effective adjustments.

The evidence shows that inclusion improves when support is built into school systems, not added in response to crisis.

- Inclusive outcomes depend on school conditions (predictability, relationships, expertise and environment), not placement or diagnosis alone.
- In mainstream settings, staff report high variability in training quality and duration, with strong appetite for better professional development.
- Staff self-efficacy is highly variable and predicted by contact/experience and ability to cope with work stress, indicating limits of training alone.
- Embedded specialist provision within mainstream schools can act as protective infrastructure, improving outcomes for pupils and strengthening whole-school inclusion when adequately resourced.

Specialist provision within mainstream schools: Evidence from Cullum Centres

Cullum Centres are run in partnership with the National Autistic Society (NAS) and are specialised units for autistic students within mainstream schools, bridging the gap between mainstream education and specialist provision.

Expansion of Cullum-style provision and adoption of key elements of the model (tailored transitions, quiet spaces, specialist staffing, sustained relationships and peer awareness) could deliver system-wide benefits if supported by clear national guidance and funding.

What's the impact of Cullum Centres?

- Longitudinal evaluation of National Autistic Society (NAS) Cullum Centres embedded within mainstream secondary schools **indicated more favourable educational experiences** for autistic pupils.
- Across a three-year period, pupils supported through Cullum Centres showed **higher attendance rates and perceived support** than autistic peers in non-Cullum Centre schools, alongside **greater academic progress** in core subjects over time. Post-16 destinations data indicate that the majority of leavers progressed to further education, sixth form or training, suggesting **improved life-course trajectories**.
- Beyond attainment, pupils and families reported **marked improvements in wellbeing and belonging**. Pupils described feeling safe, understood and able to regulate within the school environment, while parents reported reduced anxiety and increased confidence in schools' capacity to meet their child's needs.
- As one parent reflected:
"He's come on leaps and bounds since he's been here... he goes to every lesson, he's doing all his GCSEs, and he feels safe in school."
- Former pupils also highlighted longer-term impacts on social confidence and independence:
"The support I got from the Cullum Centre was invaluable... without it, I would not be where I am today."

Why do Cullum Centres work?

- Qualitative analysis shows that Cullum Centres function as protective microsystems within mainstream schools. Key mechanisms include **predictable routines, access to quiet and sensory-safe spaces, and sustained relationships with staff who hold specialist expertise**. These features enable pupils to regulate, re-engage with learning and participate in mainstream classes without the constant threat of overwhelm or exclusion.
- Importantly, the presence of Cullum Centres also **benefits the wider school community**. Staff report increased autism awareness, clearer pathways for support and reduced pressure on mainstream classrooms. One Head of Centre noted:
"There's a lot of goodwill towards the Centre and wider autistic population...it's just become a natural thing like breathing ...it's just second nature that they understand - they understand the reasons why that child's finding that queue difficult."

Implications for policy and scale-up

- The evidence indicates that Cullum Centres offer value for money when appropriately resourced, reducing crisis-driven exclusions and supporting sustained engagement with education.
- However, their effectiveness is **contingent on staffing, integration with the wider school and access to external services**. Where workforce shortages or unmet mental health needs intensify, centres risk becoming containment spaces rather than bridges to inclusion.

References

- Boddy, A. & Cook, A (2026). Specialist Resource Centres as Protective Microsystems: A Qualitative Comparative Case Study of Autistic Pupils' Experiences in Mainstream Secondary Schools. [Preprint] PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/h8zgg_v1
- Cook, A. & Boddy, A. (in press). The Impact of Specialist Resource Centres on Autistic Pupils' Experience of Mainstream School. *Autism*. Advance online publication. <https://openresearch.surrey.ac.uk/esploro/outputs/991099895202346>

Teacher confidence and inclusive practice in mainstream schools

The combined evidence points to the need for: sustained specialist training and coaching, protected time for planning and collaboration, clearer pathways to specialist advice, and accountability frameworks that reward inclusive outcomes. Without these conditions, inclusive practice remains dependent on individual goodwill rather than being reliably delivered. The system must support educators to do inclusion well.

- **Staff commitment is high, but confidence is uneven.** Across mainstream settings, staff generally support inclusion in principle yet report very different levels of confidence in how to meet neurodivergent pupils' needs day-to-day. This creates a "postcode lottery" of support within and between schools, even when intentions are positive. *"Not really knowing whether you're doing things right or possibly making things worse. Mistakes are an opportunity to learn, sure, but it's a pretty poor deal for the person on the receiving end of the mistake."* – Primary school teacher
- **Training is common but highly variable in quality and intensity.** Many staff report having had some training, but it is often brief, one-off, or narrowly focused (e.g., generic awareness rather than applied practice). The evidence suggests that "training received" is not a meaningful indicator of inclusive practice unless its *specificity, duration, and follow-through* are considered.
- **Confidence is predicted by more than training alone.** Staff self-efficacy is shaped by a combination of professional learning, everyday practice conditions, and access to specialist input. Where workload and systems are strained, staff can report knowing what would help but not being able to implement it consistently.
- **Contact and experience matter because they build practical judgement.** Sustained work with neurodivergent pupils (and opportunities to learn through experience) is linked with greater confidence and more nuanced understanding of needs. This points to the value of structured experiential learning and ongoing coaching, rather than relying on isolated CPD sessions.
- **Work stress and coping capacity are central to inclusion.** Where staff feel stretched, the ability to plan, personalise support, and respond proactively is reduced. Evidence indicates that coping with stress is associated with greater perceived capability to support neurodivergent pupils - suggesting that workforce wellbeing is an inclusion issue, not a separate agenda.
- **Time constraints drive reactive practice.** Staff describe limited time to understand pupils well, coordinate adjustments, and communicate across teams. Under time pressure, schools are more likely to fall back on crisis responses (e.g., behaviour-focused approaches) rather than preventative, relational, and environmental supports. *"I find that I am lacking in time to provide the high-quality individualised support that is expected and deserved. I see it as a priority therefore I have to cut back on other areas of my role, for example research and lesson planning in general."* – Secondary school teacher
- **Inclusive practice is strongest when it is shared and systematic.** Confidence and consistency improve when schools operate with a whole-school model: shared language, predictable routines, clear pathways to advice, and joined-up planning between teachers, pastoral staff and SEN leadership. When inclusion is treated as an individual teacher responsibility, practice becomes fragile and inconsistent.
- **Environment and belonging are not "extras" - they are enabling conditions.** Staff link successful support to practical environmental adaptations (sensory-friendly spaces, calmer transitions, predictable structures) and to relational safety. These conditions reduce pupil distress and make learning and participation more achievable.
- **Attainment pressures can crowd out inclusion unless accountability is aligned.** Staff report tension between the demands of performance metrics and inclusive practice. Where inspection/accountability emphasises attainment without equally valuing belonging, wellbeing and participation, inclusion efforts are more likely to be deprioritised or implemented inconsistently.

References

- Cook, A. & Boddy, A. (2026). Building Teacher Capacity for Inclusive Practice with Autistic Pupils: A Mixed-Methods Study of Self-Efficacy, Training, Attitudes, and School Context [Preprint]. PsyArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/hfr57_v1
- Hamilton, L. G., & Cook, A. (2026). Supporting Neurodivergent Pupils in Mainstream Schools: A Mixed-Methods Survey of School Staff in the United Kingdom. Neurodiversity, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330261419277>

Policy Recommendations

■ Specify and fund 'active ingredients' of specialist resource provision within mainstream schools

With £3 billion committed to expanding specialist places in mainstream settings, it is essential that a national framework defines non-negotiables for specialist resource centres, including specialist staffing ratios, safe base, planned inclusion pathways, family liaison, and whole-school workforce development. High-needs funding should be ring-fenced for implementation, staffing and outcome monitoring so local areas scale models with fidelity, rather than creating under-resourced 'units'.

■ Make neurodiversity-affirming practice a core teacher standard

Embed clear definitions and principles in Initial Teacher Training and the Early Career Framework, defining this as a strengths-based, inclusive approach that recognises neurological difference, values diverse communication and learning styles, adapts environments and pedagogy, and rejects goals of neurotypical conformity. Standards should be explicit, practice-based and assessed through evidence such as lesson design and environmental adaptations. **The recent £200 million commitment to SEND teacher training provides a timely opportunity to embed these standards at scale**, supported by ongoing CPD and experiential learning alongside specialist practitioners so staff confidence and competence do not rely on personal interest or chance experience.

■ Align accountability with belonging, participation and wellbeing

Strengthen inspection/accountability so inclusion is judged through pupil experience and participation - not only attainment. Incorporate into inspection evidence validated measures of belonging and wellbeing, triangulated with attendance, exclusions and timetables.

■ Protect time for inclusive planning and multi-agency problem solving

Introduce protected time entitlements for teachers and SENCOs to plan adjustments, review sensory/communication profiles, and coordinate with families and external services. Evidence from staff accounts shows inclusion fails when time collapses into crisis management. Time protections should be linked to high-needs funding and monitored through workload and retention metrics.

■ Build predictable, sensory-considered school environments by design

Issue practical guidance and capital/revenue incentives for sensory-considered spaces, structured transitions, and supported 'unstructured' times (lunch, corridors, entry/exit). Staff and pupils report these are high-risk contexts for distress. Require schools to offer low-arousal options and interest-based clubs, with pupil voice informing adjustments.

■ Support evidence-based SEND innovation with representative research and translation

Fund robust co-produced evaluations and implementation studies that include neurodivergent samples and report impacts on attainment, wellbeing and participation. Pair funding with translation support (e.g., training resources, implementation toolkits, costings) so schools can adopt evidence-based approaches at scale.

"There needs to be a shift to making the education system work for children, not the other way around."

- Secondary School Teacher

WORK WITH US

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