



Schools White Paper 2026

Every Child Achieving and Thriving

What it means for inclusion, belonging and SEND in mainstream schools, and what this looks like in practice

The [DfE Schools White Paper](#)¹, introduces significant SEND reform policy changes, setting out a system where high standards and inclusion go hand in hand. Mainstream schools are expected to become more inclusive by design, with:

- ✓ Inclusion in mainstream as the norm
- ✓ Earlier identification and support
- ✓ Stronger support within schools before statutory escalation
- ✓ Higher expectations for attendance, belonging and engagement
- ✓ Closer collaboration between schools, families and wider services



Universal changes for mainstream schools

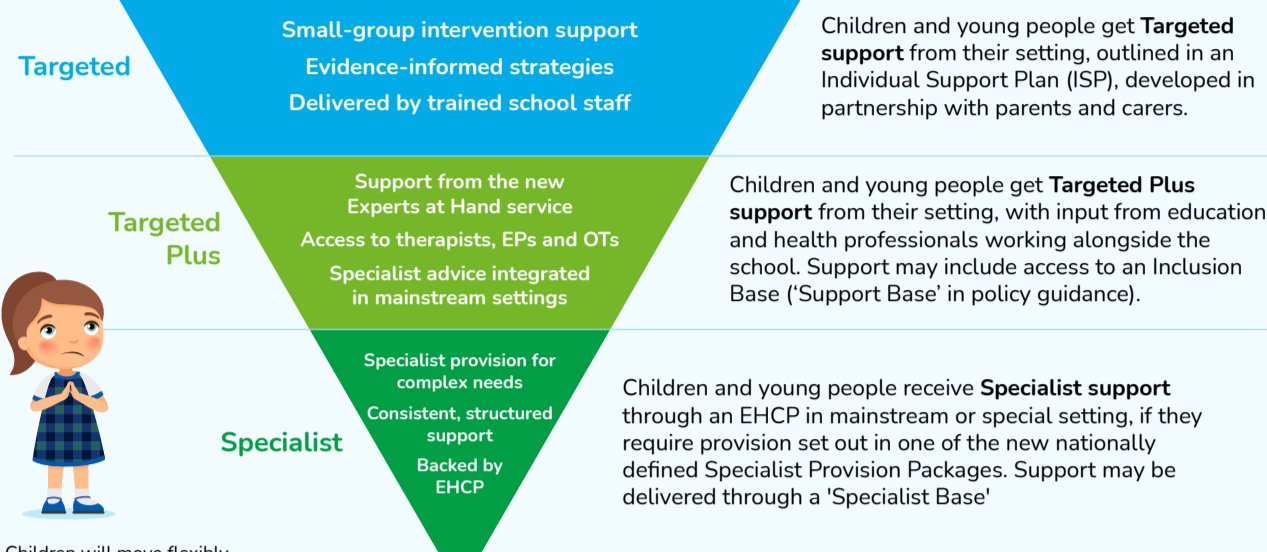
Children's needs will be met through a new layered system of support, with greater responsibility placed on mainstream schools and EHCPs retained for the most complex needs. These changes sit alongside a strengthened universal offer, setting a new baseline expectation for inclusive practice for all children.

New foundations and expectations

- ✓ Develop and publish a whole-school Inclusion Strategy to set out how needs will be identified and supported
- ✓ Individual Support Plans replacing EHCP-led processes for earlier, more flexible support
- ✓ Mandatory SEND and inclusion training for all staff to build consistent, inclusive classroom practice
- ✓ National Inclusion Standards to guide consistent, evidence-informed inclusive practice
- ✓ Updated SEND Code of Practice to reflect new expectations and systems
- ✓ Greater access to specialist support without the need for statutory thresholds

New Experts at Hand service available to all children, not just those with an EHCP, supporting earlier intervention

Adapted from UK Government SEND Reform model (2026)



Children will move flexibly between layers based on need

Support will be available earlier, more flexible and embedded in school life

What schools will receive

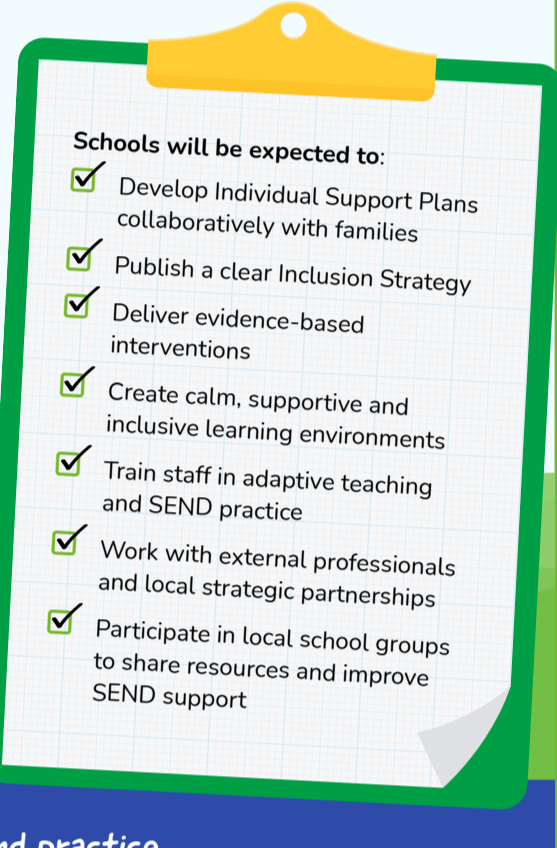
Mainstream schools are set to receive greater control over SEND funding and support, including:

- ✓ A share of the £1.6 billion Inclusive Mainstream Fund over three years
- ✓ National SEND and inclusion training for all staff
- ✓ Access to a new £1.8 billion Experts at Hand multi-agency support service (EPs, SALTs, OTs)
- ✓ Digital systems for tracking Individual Support Plans
- ✓ National Inclusion Standards to guide consistent, evidence-informed inclusive practice
- ✓ Capital investment to improve accessibility and create more inclusion bases and specialist places

This represents a shift in responsibility, funding and delivery for mainstream schools.

What mainstream schools will be expected to do

Download our handy action checklist



Inclusion must be embedded in everyday systems and practice.

What this means in reality

Policy sets direction. Practice creates impact. If schools are expected to identify needs earlier and respond more consistently, they will need to:

- ✓ Create safe, relational spaces such as nurture and inclusion rooms
- ✓ Deliver structured small-group interventions
- ✓ Teach social and emotional skills explicitly
- ✓ Build consistent, trusted relationships between adults and children
- ✓ Support children to develop emotional regulation through connection
- ✓ Provide support beyond the curriculum and classroom

This means thinking beyond intervention to building social connectedness and belonging.



Current situation and what children need

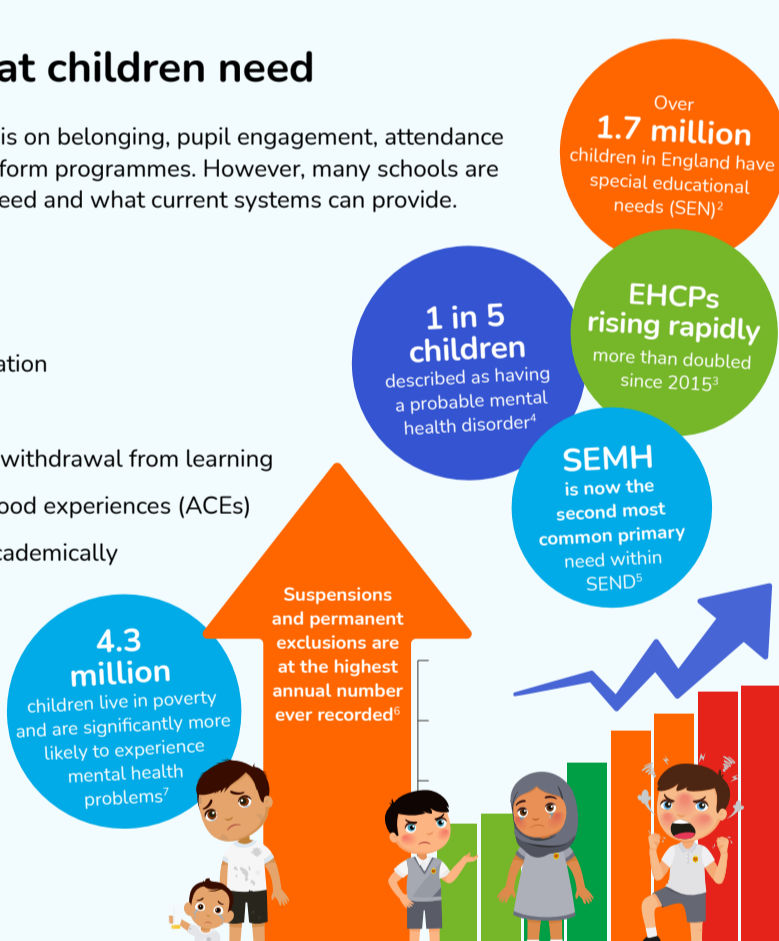
The White Paper places much greater emphasis on belonging, pupil engagement, attendance and home-school partnership than previous reform programmes. However, many schools are already seeing a gap between what children need and what current systems can provide.

Many children are:

- ✓ Already struggling to engage
- ✓ Experiencing anxiety, distress or dysregulation
- ✓ Lacking trust in adults and in school
- ✓ At risk of persistent absence, exclusion or withdrawal from learning
- ✓ Experiencing the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- ✓ Falling behind socially, emotionally and academically

Children need:

- ✓ To feel safe
- ✓ To feel seen, heard and understood
- ✓ Strong relationships with trusted adults
- ✓ Support to understand and manage emotions and behaviour
- ✓ A genuine sense of belonging



Belonging is the foundation of achievement. Strong SEMH provision underpins inclusive practice.

Staff are central to delivery

Inclusion happens through people. All staff need the confidence and skills to identify needs early, adapt practice and build effective support plans for each child. Mandatory whole-staff SEND training aims to ensure consistent, inclusive practice across the school. This depends heavily on the adults children trust most, including:

- ✓ Teaching Assistants
- ✓ Nurture practitioners
- ✓ ELSAs
- ✓ Pastoral and inclusion staff
- ✓ SENCOs
- ✓ Confident, supported classroom teachers

The success of reform will depend not only on policy design, but on whether schools have the time, training and support to make this a reality to deliver interventions, support regulation, build relationships and help children to re-engage. This is a concern already being raised in sector commentary.

Inclusion depends on skilled, trained and supported adults.



The risks: Policy alone does not create inclusion

If this becomes a checklist activity:

- ✓ Interventions become superficial rather than meaningful
- ✓ Emotional needs remain unmet
- ✓ Staff workload increases as does staff turnover
- ✓ Behaviour and attendance challenges persist and escalate
- ✓ Children remain in school, but do not feel they belong

But when schools are supported to do this well, the impact is significant.



The opportunities



When this is done well, children begin to:

- ✓ Feel safe and understood
- ✓ Build confidence and resilience
- ✓ Re-engage positively with learning
- ✓ Form stronger relationships
- ✓ Believe they can succeed

Schools are better able to:

- ✓ Identify needs earlier
- ✓ Reduce exclusions
- ✓ Improve attendance and engagement
- ✓ Build inclusive, confident staff teams
- ✓ Help children thrive, not just achieve

Policy sets the direction. Practice determines whether children feel they truly belong.

How Hamish & Milo supports SEMH and inclusion in schools

Hamish & Milo supports the whole school community, including children, families and school staff, to strengthen SEMH provision as part of a wider inclusive approach.

- ✓ Deliver structured, evidence-based, therapeutic SEMH interventions
- ✓ Equip TAs and pastoral staff with the training, resources, and supervision to lead support with confidence
- ✓ Develop social and emotional literacy, regulation and a sense of belonging
- ✓ Support the development of nurture provision and inclusion spaces
- ✓ Provide clear impact reporting and measurable outcomes data
- ✓ Strengthen home-school partnerships and wider community collaboration
- ✓ Place children's voices at the centre of provision and inclusion



The principles behind Hamish & Milo align closely with the direction of SEND reform, particularly around inclusion, early intervention, and social and emotional development.

Book a free consultation

Explore our programmes, research, evidence and case studies. Scan the QR code or visit hamishandmilo.org



Helping children be happier, heard and connected.