Harrow Monitoring Group

advocating inclusion so everyone can access - and shape - the services they need

Harrow Monitoring Group - email

Response to the SEND Reform Consultation on Every Child Achieving and Thriving

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Executive summary

The Harrow Monitoring Group welcomes the publication of Every child achieving and thriving by the Department for Education as a renewed statement of national ambition for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities across the 0–25 system. The aspiration to create a coherent continuum of support, reduce fragmentation between education, health and care, and strengthen early intervention reflects long-standing stakeholder concerns and is, in principle, constructive.

However, the White Paper does not sufficiently confront the structural and cultural drivers that continue to limit SEND pupils' access to effective education and social care, nor does it adequately address the persistent barriers faced by those from minority and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. While financial investment is necessary, the document does not convincingly demonstrate how institutional ethos, professional expectations and accountability frameworks will be transformed to embed inclusion as a core educational value rather than a procedural or compliance-based obligation.

Systemic gaps and required cultural reform

1. The White Paper places emphasis on additional resources, workforce development and system integration, yet our experience indicates that funding injections alone cannot rectify entrenched compliance-driven cultures within many education settings and service delivery structures. Provision frequently operates around documentation, eligibility thresholds and inspection defensibility rather than relational practice centred on the child. Compassion, empathy and cultural responsiveness remain uneven and

often dependent on individual practitioners rather than organisational norms. The White Paper references inclusive practice but lacks enforceable mechanisms that would reshape incentives, professional standards and inspection criteria to reward demonstrable inclusive culture, co-production with families and culturally competent engagement.

2. Persistent low expectations and stereotyping continue to constrain SEND pupils' attainment and progress. The assumption that special educational need necessarily correlates with reduced cognitive potential remains embedded within some pedagogical approaches and assessment decisions, leading to under-challenge for academically able pupils with SEND. While the White Paper acknowledges ambition for high outcomes, it does not explicitly address attitudinal bias or introduce accountability measures that would expose patterns of systematic under-expectation. Without such safeguards, the risk remains that policy rhetoric on high aspiration will not translate into classroom practice, particularly for pupils whose strengths are masked by communication, behavioural or sensory differences.

3. Curriculum differentiation represents another critical gap between aspiration and practice. The White Paper promotes flexibility but stops short of articulating a robust framework for adaptive curriculum design that meaningfully responds to pupils' interests, learning profiles, pace and self-confidence levels. In many settings, differentiation is interpreted narrowly as task simplification rather than personalised learning routes that enable depth, enrichment and autonomy. This limitation results in SEND pupils experiencing curriculum dilution rather than curriculum accessibility, thereby restricting motivation and engagement. The absence of explicit expectations regarding co-designed learning experiences, project-based opportunities and strength-based curriculum models diminishes the transformative potential of the proposals.

4. Closely related is the ongoing inconsistency in differentiated classroom teaching practice. Effective inclusive teaching requires dynamic instructional adjustment, multiple ways of presenting knowledge, and responsive assessment for learning. Yet classroom observations and stakeholder testimony indicate that differentiation is often superficial or delegated to support staff rather than embedded within teacher practice. The White Paper refers to workforce training but does not specify how teacher professional development will move beyond awareness to demonstrable competence in adaptive teaching approaches. Nor does it address workload pressures and curriculum coverage demands that frequently undermine teachers' capacity to implement nuanced differentiation, thereby leaving pupils insufficiently stretched academically and socially.

5. The imbalance between in-class and out-of-class support also remains insufficiently interrogated. While targeted interventions have value, excessive withdrawal from mainstream learning environments can produce social isolation, fragmented learning experiences and reduced peer modelling. Many pupils demonstrate improved

engagement when supported within the main classroom through collaborative approaches and universal design strategies. The White Paper promotes inclusion but does not critically examine the systemic drivers that perpetuate detached support models, including staffing structures, funding allocation rules and performance metrics that favour intervention quantification over inclusive participation. Greater emphasis on classroom-embedded support and co-teaching models would better reflect evidence-based inclusive practice.

6. Early identification and assessment of need is rightly highlighted as a priority, yet implementation challenges persist. Variability in assessment quality, delays in recognition of emerging needs and limited sharing of pupil-centred plans continue to impede timely support. The White Paper's proposals for streamlined processes are positive but require stronger commitments to multi-agency information sharing, family-accessible documentation and transparent monitoring of plan implementation. A widely shared, living personal plan that is regularly reviewed and outcome-tracked would represent a substantive improvement; however, the policy stops short of specifying governance mechanisms that would ensure such plans are consistently enacted rather than remaining aspirational documentation.

7. Concerns also remain regarding social care assessment and placement decision-making. Instances of unsuitable placements, often arising from incomplete assessment or constrained local capacity, continue to adversely affect pupil wellbeing and educational continuity. Over-reliance on Independent Reviewing Officers whose effectiveness varies across contexts can compound these difficulties when challenge and oversight functions are weak. The White Paper's integration narrative does not sufficiently address accountability within social care decision pathways or propose strengthened independent scrutiny arrangements to safeguard the appropriateness of placements and the responsiveness of care packages.

8. The Group's analysis is informed by evidence presented within our earlier review, SEND Critique, alongside our direct experience of classroom practice and sustained engagement with pupils and parents. Through observation, casework and dialogue, we have encountered classrooms where differentiation is limited, expectations are inconsistently communicated, and support arrangements unintentionally isolate pupils from peer learning. Parents frequently report navigating fragmented systems and encountering procedural rather than relational responses to concerns, while pupils describe feeling either overlooked or insufficiently challenged. These lived experiences reinforce the conclusion that systemic improvement requires not only structural reform but transformation of everyday practice within classrooms and professional interactions across services.

Conclusion

The crisis in SEND provision is not simply a question of resources or the expansion of special schools, but a crisis of vision, a reflection of how society understands inclusion, diversity, and the very purpose of education. The way forward lies in reframing SEND not as a problem to be managed, but as a natural dimension of human diversity to be recognised and embraced educationally, socially and politically. Until this fundamental shift occurs, reforms risk being constructed upon a problematic foundation that will continue to reproduce problematic outcomes. The White Paper therefore represents an important step but not yet a decisive turning point; meaningful progress will depend on embedding cultural change, high expectations, personalised learning, classroom inclusion, rigorous early assessment and accountable social care decision-making as core features of the SEND system rather than peripheral aspirations.

Recommendations

1. Embed inclusion and cultural competence explicitly within inspection and accountability frameworks, linking evaluation criteria to evidence of inclusive ethos and high expectations.
2. Mandate demonstrable training in adaptive teaching approaches for all classroom teachers, with measurable standards of practice.
3. Require curriculum models that support personalised learning routes, depth of study and enrichment for academically able pupils with SEND.
4. Prioritise classroom-embedded support models and co-teaching approaches over routine withdrawal interventions, unless clearly justified by evidence.
5. Standardise early assessment protocols with clear timelines and ensure that personal plans are accessible, widely shared and subject to independent monitoring.
6. Strengthen oversight of social care assessment and placement decisions through more robust independent review and transparent accountability mechanisms.
7. Establish mechanisms for sustained co-production with pupils and parents to ensure that policy implementation reflects lived experience rather than procedural compliance alone.