

Curriculum and assessment review – [Call for evidence](#)

The response by Together Trust was submitted in November 2024.

Question 14 of the survey:

In the current curriculum, assessment system and qualification pathways, are there any barriers in continuing to improve attainment, progress, access or participation for learners with SEND?

At Together Trust, we provide care, specialist education and support to vulnerable children, young people, and adults across the North West. Our responses to the questions are informed by feedback from staff at our specialist school, Inscape, where we support young people from Year 1 to Year 14. While Inscape is not required to follow the national curriculum and benefits from greater flexibility, much of our curriculum is still aligned with the national framework.

We know that in mainstream schools, the focus is often more on academic results than on formal systems to track students' social and emotional development. Meanwhile, many students with SEND face emotionally-based school avoidance ([RCSLT, 2023](#)). By prioritising the monitoring of social and emotional wellbeing, providing appropriate in-school support, and referring students to external services when needed, schools can enhance the progress, access, and participation of learners with SEND. Moreover, introducing greater flexibility in assessments could be highly beneficial for learners with SEND.

Example:

In 2020, one of our students (X) was completing his GCSEs. Due to various complexities, including mental health challenges, and the unpredictability of exams, sitting traditional GCSE exams would likely have been an overwhelming experience and a significant barrier for X in achieving his qualifications.

However, the pandemic allowed X to be assessed through teacher-assessed grades. Thanks to his consistent effort and strong evidence of his work, X achieved excellent GCSE results. This success enabled him to secure the apprenticeship he wanted—an outcome that might not have been possible under traditional exam conditions.

Considering this example, introducing greater flexibility in assessments for learners with SEND—such as offering the option of teacher-assessed grades, sitting exams on the day, or a combination of both—could better address individual students' needs. These decisions should be made collaboratively, involving the young person, their family, and their teachers.

Question 21:

Are there any particular challenges with regard to the English and maths

a) curricula and

b) assessment for learners in need of additional support (e.g. learners with SEND, socioeconomic disadvantage, English as an additional language (EAL))?

Are there any changes you would suggest to overcome these challenges?

We've heard from staff in our specialist schools about the importance of making subjects like English, Maths, and others relevant to students. When students can see the purpose of what they are learning and understand its personal significance, it can transform their attitude toward the subject.

Example:

One of our students (J), saw no point in learning English and refused to engage. When she joined our specialist school, J's levels were significantly below her age expectations. However, her teacher worked with J to explore her career aspirations, explaining the qualifications she needed – such as a GCSE in English – to achieve her desired career. Understanding the purpose of learning English motivated J to engage. Within just a few months, J's progress was remarkable. She was writing a six-page response to an English text at her level, with significant improvements in her handwriting, content, and language skills.

This example highlights the success of a person-centred approach, where one-on-one attention from the teacher provided the right support to help the student understand the relevance of the subject.

Moreover, Inscape school is participating in the AQA numeracy project, a pilot initiative focused on real-life maths skills. AQA will visit the school to conduct the project, during which students will test a new maths app being developed and provide feedback to the researchers. As this project is still ongoing, we would be happy to share insights on its effectiveness once completed.

Question 38

What can we do to ensure the assessment system at key stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, including learners in need of additional support in their education (for example SEND, disadvantage, EAL)?

To ensure that the assessment system at Key Stages 1 and 2 works well for all learners, a more flexible, inclusive approach is essential. One of the key changes that could benefit all learners is the flexibility in statutory assessments. Currently, these assessments are often rigid and may not accommodate the diverse needs of students who require additional support.

Granting teachers more discretion in administering statutory assessments, and adopting a person-centred approach tailored to each student's needs, could foster a more inclusive system. This approach would mean assessing when it's most appropriate for the student to access the assessments, considering factors like their individual learning needs and emotional readiness.

Example:

Unlike traditional exams, functional skills assessments can be retaken multiple times throughout the year, allowing students to practice, reflect, and improve. This approach not only gives students more opportunities to succeed, but also helps alleviate the pressure associated with a one-time-only assessment. For students with SEND or other vulnerabilities, this system can provide a more supportive environment, allowing them to develop confidence and experience success in their learning journey.

Additionally, incorporating formative assessments into the curriculum would allow teachers to continuously monitor student progress against the curriculum, especially for those with additional support needs. Formative assessments can be a powerful tool for tracking small, incremental progress and identifying gaps early on. For students with SEND, this can help tailor teaching approaches to ensure they are progressing at their own pace. These assessments can be adjusted to account for individual needs and offer immediate feedback to inform further teaching.

Question 46

Should there be any changes to the current accountability system to better support progress and incentivise inclusion for young people with SEND and / or from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds?

Adapting Digital Systems for Progress Monitoring

Staff at our specialist schools have highlighted a major challenge, noting that existing digital platforms for tracking progress and setting targets are not designed to meet the unique needs of learners with SEND. These platforms are crucial for our students, yet they require extensive adaptations to function effectively, and still fall short of providing adequate support.

Developing more flexible digital tools designed specifically for young people with SEND would greatly enhance schools' ability to monitor progress accurately and set meaningful targets.

Enhancing accountability for EHCP outcomes

As a specialist school – Inscape – is expected to show progress against students' EHCPs. However, these outcomes are often outdated or inappropriate, requiring schools to create their own targets. Local authorities (LAs) should face greater scrutiny regarding their role in ensuring EHCPs are accurate and meaningful, while central

government must provide adequate funding to allow LAs to comply with their statutory obligations.

Improved Class Sizes and Multidisciplinary Teams

At Inscape, staff assess progress all the time through the curriculum to make sure children are achieving the very best that they can. We do wider assessments to look at their self-regulation, their language levels, all these other bits of information that can support us to help them access learning in the right way, and you know at the right level for them.

There are some tools that we use to help with that, such as:

- **Boxall Profile** – helps assess progress in relation to social, emotional and mental health difficulties.
- **Autism Education Trust framework (AET)** – focuses on autism-specific areas for development, such as communication and social interaction, emotional regulation, and sensory needs.

In smaller class settings, such as those at Inscape (six students per class with four staff), the presence of additional specialists like speech therapists, occupational therapists, play therapists, PBS practitioners, and nurture practitioners allows for tailored interventions and ongoing assessments. Expanding this model could better support students' progress and inclusion in mainstream settings.

Inclusion challenges in statutory testing.

Statutory tests, such as phonics, Year 4 multiplication tests, and SATs, are often not inclusive for neurodiverse learners or those with additional needs. These tests assume a level playing field, but students with SEND or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may lack exposure to the language, concepts, or cultural experiences required to succeed in these assessments.

Example:

“Years ago, there was a Year 6 reading test for Key Stage 2 SATs in which one of the texts described a forest fire as a “terror.” For some children in the class, the only understanding of the word “terror” was that their parents called them a “terror.” This example highlights the lack of exposure to certain language, which can significantly hinder a child's ability to access an assessment” - staff member

When assessments are given to every child across the country at the same time, it's unrealistic to expect all of them to have the same knowledge and experiences to fully understand the text.

Addressing Socioeconomic Disadvantage

Socioeconomic challenges compound assessment difficulties. For example, children from high-deprivation areas may have limited experiences outside their immediate environments, such as school, a local supermarket, or a neighbour's house. This restricted worldview inhibits their ability to engage with certain assessment content designed with broader cultural experiences in mind.

Example:

One of our teachers has previously worked in areas of high deprivation, and the children she worked with, whether they had SEND or not, had a significantly reduced ability to access assessments in the same way as other children. In a writing test where the children were asked to write about "having a really good day out," a very high number of children in a class of 30 wrote about going to McDonald's.

Disadvantage comes in many forms, but for some groups, the social, moral, spiritual, and cultural aspects are severely limited, and measuring this is incredibly difficult. Communication is fundamental, yet many children—particularly those from deprived backgrounds or with SEND—lack adequate support. Introducing speech and language therapists into schools, alongside occupational therapists, could enable targeted interventions. This would not only address immediate needs but also reduce long-term costs by supporting a social model of therapy in the education sector.

In summary, reimagining the accountability system with an emphasis on inclusivity, tailored support, and flexibility would better serve students with SEND and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This would require structural reforms, adequate funding, and the integration of multidisciplinary approaches in schools.