



Government Consultation Response

From consultation to co-design
in inclusive education: Lived
experience and AI

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Response to SEND Reform: putting children and young people first

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About the authors:

Lorenzo Ciletti is a researcher with expertise in inclusive education. His work focuses on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and teaching assistants (TA) in supporting disabled children in the UK and internationally.

Ben Whitburn similarly engages in inclusive education research. Ben draws on critical methodologies to develop research centred on the voices of those affected by disability.

This consultation response, 'From consultation to co-design in inclusive education: Lived experience and AI', draws on insights from Lorenzo and Ben's recent research on methodologies that foreground the lived experience of children with SEND, the role of TAs, and the use of AI in inclusive education. References cited throughout this response are as follows:

1. Ciletti, L., Webster, R. & Strogilos, V. (2025). Scaffolding by teaching assistants in England: Exploring the interaction between practice and task structure. *Support for Learning*, 00, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.70005>
2. Ciletti, L., Whitburn, B., & Shew, A. (2026a). *Reconstructing imagination in research: Advancing a methodology of imaginative pluralism* [Manuscript submitted for publication]. [Institution anonymised for review].
3. Ciletti, L., Whitburn, B., & Strogilos, V. (2026b). *(Ir)responsible uses of artificial intelligence in inclusive education: A critical analysis of England's national guidelines* [Manuscript submitted for publication]. [Institution anonymised for review].

Q1: We want children, young people and their families to be involved in making better, evidence-based decisions about SEND, both in their local area and across the country. How can we make sure children, young people and their families have a genuine say in these decisions?

Disabled children should be at the forefront of developing inclusive education knowledge and practices (Ciletti et al., 2026a). Disabled children are experts in their educational challenges and needs, yet they are often marginalised within inclusive education research and practice.

Today's inclusive education is shaped by non-disabled academics and practitioners (Ciletti et al., 2026b). Drawing on non-disabled lived experience, research and practice prioritise approaches that better serve non-disabled learners. For instance, frequent whole-class verbal interactions are promoted to facilitate (and render efficient) the learning of multiple topics for non-disabled students, yet these may exclude children with communication and hearing difficulties. The lack of direct experience of disability, and thus limited knowledge of how to support it, constrains the implementation of inclusive practices. Teachers—and the non-disabled evidence informing training and practice (see Q12 for details)—acknowledge this knowledge gap.

To address this, these actions are proposed:

1. ***Prioritise lived experience in funding.*** The £4 million UK Research Innovation and Department for Education SEND funding should include dedicated streams for research centred on the lived experiences of disabled children.
2. ***Embed co-design.*** Disabled children should be recognised as equal partners in designing and reviewing provision, through yearly structured discussions (e.g., in early lessons; see Q15 for details).

Q2: How can we make sure that high-quality evidence and best practice inform decisions about SEND? Please share examples.

The reforms signal a cultural shift in provision for children identified as having SEND; yet, the goalposts have not shifted in how these young people are defined and judged. Decision-making remains shaped by framings of disability that locate difficulties within individuals rather than examining how systems produce disablement.

What counts as high-quality evidence is not neutral (Ciletti et al., 2026a). Current evidence hierarchies privilege short-term attainment data and standardised intervention outcomes while marginalising lived forms of knowledge. Research on disabled children's experiences of inclusive education shows that this narrowing of evidence risks reproducing ableism, even when framed as evidence-based reform.

To ensure evidence appropriately informs SEND decision-making, it must be understood as plural, situated, and ethically grounded. Alongside quantitative studies, decision-making should legitimise qualitative, longitudinal, and participatory research examining lived

experience, school culture, and institutional barriers. Research on co-production shows that when disabled children and families are positioned as knowledge holders rather than consultees, decisions become more responsive, equitable, and sustainable (Ciletti et al., 2026b). Ensuring evidence informs SEND decisions thus requires shifting the question from ‘What intervention fits this category?’ to ‘How are systems and expectations producing disability here — and how might they be transformed?’

Q11: What should the top three priority areas be for building and sharing evidence within the National Inclusion Standards?

One priority is recognising the centrality of disabled children’s lived experience in inclusive education (see Q1 for details).

A second priority is the role of teaching assistants (TA; Ciletti et al., 2025). Despite being marginalised in the design of individual support plans (ISP), TAs work closely with disabled children and have strong insight into their needs. ***Standards shall require their involvement in ISP development and review, through regular planning meetings with teachers and disabled students*** (see Q16 for details).

A third priority is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in inclusive education. Current national policies centralise the responsibility for AI design in teaching staff (Ciletti et al., 2026b). This limits AI use to tasks within teachers’ expertise, and risks the reinforcement of practices that marginalise disabled children. For example, the current promoted use of AI as a personal tutor echoes constant one-to-one TA support, possibly creating a barrier to peer interaction.

AI standards shall thus incorporate disabled children’s lived experience and knowledge in the pedagogical loop (see Q15 for details). Co-design could support AI applications beyond teacher-led models and possibly expertise, while leveraging AI’s knowledge affordances to better meet children’s needs (Ciletti et al., 2026b). For example, AI could teach sign language in classrooms including children with hearing difficulties, promoting inclusion and shared learning.

Q12: What are the most important issues for national training to cover, to help support children and young people with SEND?

National training should centre on the rationale and practical strategies for including disabled learners in the pedagogical process. While the White Paper recognises the importance of collaborating with parents to inform teaching practices, disabled children—who have lived experience and valuable insights into their educational needs—remain marginalised. Training teachers in co-designed practices with students would ensure more responsive and effective teaching.

Inclusive education training continues to rely on non-disabled academics and trainers (Ciletti et al., 2026b). Their perspectives, shaped by non-disabled and mainstream experiences (e.g., as former non-disabled students), may misalign with the diverse biological, educational, and lived

realities of disabled children. This experiential gap limits understanding of the complexity of disabled learners' needs, resulting in training and practices that do not support their education; see Q1 for an example.

To address this, national training should:

- Train teachers in the relevance of co-responsibility in teaching with disabled students and other relevant actors, notably teaching assistants (see Q11).
- ***Equip educators with participatory methods to engage and communicate with children with diverse needs*** (e.g., drawings).
- ***Support teachers to use artificial intelligence (AI) in co-designed teaching, particularly when enabling inclusive practices that go beyond teachers' existing expertise*** (e.g., AI teaching sign language).

Q15: What would provide assurance for families that an Individual Support Plan (ISP) is high quality and contains the essential information?

The SEND reform national conversations highlight a key principle for assuring high-quality individual support plans (ISP): 'Nothing about disabled students without us'. Disabled children have direct knowledge of their impairments (e.g., being deaf) and of how existing practices can disable and exclude them (e.g., reliance on verbal whole-class communication; see Q1). Including them in co-designing ISPs and their key components, such as barriers to learning, would help challenge non-inclusive practices and lead to effective support (e.g., teaching sign language).

A further principle is that ISPs shall be designed in relation to the whole school context (Ciletti et al., 2026b). In the White Paper, ISPs reflect a predominantly individualised approach to assessment and provision. As such, children's assessment and support are devised in isolation and can separate them from the wider context. For example, one-to-one provision via artificial intelligence (AI) is often added while whole-class teaching strategies remain unchanged. Although AI can support individual access to whole-class education (e.g., transcribing teacher talk for a deaf child), such use can however limit peer interaction and inclusion.

Universal design should therefore be embedded within ISPs. For example, ISPs should include whole-class adjustments, such as using AI to support teaching sign language. Such a more relational approach to ISPs would strengthen inclusion and shared learning (See Q16 for details).

Q16: How can we ensure Individual Support Plans are clear, concise and practical for professionals to use?

Individual support plans (ISP) should be contextually co-designed by professionals such as teaching staff, parents, and crucially disabled students (See Q1). This approach would ensure

ISPs include accessibility needs (e.g., Braille), supporting more effective collaboration in their design and review.

To ensure a co-designed approach in relation to the plan's accessibility structure and drafting, the following practical elements should be included:

- **Co-authorship.** ISPs should embrace multiple authorship, with teachers, parents, professionals, and disabled students co-composing the plan and contributing to its key components, such as accessibility features.
- **Structured collaborative meetings.** ISPs should be developed via structured meetings, embedded within lessons or scheduled alongside the curriculum. These meetings should be recorded as part of the plan to facilitate ongoing review.
- **Safeguarding the participation of disabled children.** To address power imbalances (e.g., concerns about assessment from students), meetings should focus on sharing and proposing actions, such as reasonable adjustments, rather than judging them. Final decisions shall involve compromise, with students given greater decision-making weight (e.g., veto rights).
- **Relational framing of ISPs.** ISPs should be contextual rather than individualised, considering assessment and provision in relation to the wider school environment (see Q15). *They should thus be reframed as 'Inclusive Support Plans'.*

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