



Answering  
tomorrow's  
challenges  
today

# Difference Matters

**Consultation for London's Violence Reduction Unit: Informing the development of a programme to improve the inclusion of neurodivergent young people in mainstream schools**

**August 2024**

# Contents

Executive summary.....	3
Introduction .....	6
Programme objectives .....	8
Overarching principles .....	11
Selecting schools.....	13
Programme components .....	15
Overview.....	15
Core component 1: Student voice.....	16
Core component 2: School leadership .....	19
Core component 3: Supported action planning .....	21
Core component 4: Budget resource.....	26
Core component 5: Shared learning .....	28
Conclusions and next steps.....	30
Terminology.....	32
References.....	33

# Executive summary

## The research

This report summarises insights from Ecorys' consultation with a range of professionals to inform the development of [London Violence Reduction Unit's](#) (VRU) [Difference Matters](#) programme, funded by the Mayor of London. Difference Matters seeks to improve the experiences of neurodivergent young people in school by making schools more neuroinclusive. It aims to reduce persistent absence, suspensions and exclusions as part of preventing young people from being affected by violence. This report proposes a broad model for the programme drawing on learning from consultations with professionals. It is informed by a [companion report](#), written by Resources for Autism, which shares the findings from their research with neurodivergent young people and their families.

## The challenge

Data, highlighted below, show that there are stark differences in the outcomes of neurodivergent young people and their neurotypical peers.



Young people with SEN and no EHCP are **5 times more likely** to be excluded than those with no SEN.



Severe, unauthorised absence is **2.5 times higher** among young people with SEN and no EHCP.



**More than half** of 6 to 16 year olds identified as having a SEN or disability have a probable mental health disorder.



School exclusion is well-established as a **risk factor for future involvement in, and exposure to, crime.**

Research suggests that unauthorised absence is often linked to 'school distress', leading to Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA). Studies suggest a link between school distress and neurodivergence. In 1 study, **over 92%** of young people experiencing school distress were neurodivergent.

Our consultation with professionals gave key insights to guide the development of Difference Matters including:

- ▶ Transition to secondary school is a critical time when neurodivergent young people often face additional challenges.
- ▶ Some school staff and students do not have enough understanding of neurodiversity which can contribute to some neurodivergent young people experiencing social isolation, bullying and frequent behavioural sanctions.
- ▶ Schools typically operate a one-size-fits-all model with little flexibility in structures, policies and expectations of students. This model can fail to meet the needs of many neurodivergent young people.
- ▶ A programme that proposes a new one-size-fits-all approach is also likely to be ineffective. Schools need bespoke plans for becoming more neuroinclusive, driven by the views and experiences of neurodivergent students.



The [companion report](#) produced by Resources for Autism similarly reinforces the difficulties posed by inflexible school practices - including behaviour and uniform policies - unsuitable school environments, and a lack of understanding of neuroinclusive teaching practices.

These challenges are likely to be impacting many of the 15-20% of children in mainstream education who have a special educational need.<sup>1</sup> If school leaders are serious about tackling persistent absence and reducing suspensions and exclusions it is clear that action needs to be taken to address the needs of neurodivergent young people.

## The aims

In response to our research, Difference Matters should aim to:

- improve school life for neurodivergent young people by making schools more neuroinclusive
- empower neurodivergent young people and promote a strengths-based approach
- reduce disproportional persistent absence, suspensions and exclusions as part of reducing the risk of being affected by violence

## The model

Difference Matters is guided by key principles drawn from the VRU's own [values](#) and those highlighted by participants in the consultation. It has 5 core components:

1. **STUDENT VOICE:** It prioritises the empowerment of neurodivergent young people by putting their voices at the centre of changes made in their schools.
2. **SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:** It will create a direct line of communication between neurodivergent young people and leaders so they can collaborate on solutions. It will provide learning opportunities so staff and students can build their understanding of neurodiversity.
3. **ACTION PLANNING:** It will help young people and school leadership to work collaboratively on identifying issues impacting neurodivergent young people and developing solutions to address these.
4. **BUDGET** The model will provide human and financial resource to facilitate the work and implement solutions.
5. **SHARED LEARNING** It will create networks of youth voice groups, schools and boroughs to support innovation and ensure changes are sustainable.

## Next steps






The VRU will pilot the model across selected schools in a sample group of London boroughs. The pilot will begin in early summer 2025 and conclude in August 2027, spanning 3 academic years (24/25, 25/26, 26/27). The VRU will share learning during the pilot and commission an evaluation of the programme to assess the model's efficacy in meeting the aims of Difference Matters. The VRU welcomes feedback and opportunities to collaborate with other organisations committed to improving neurodivergent young people's experiences of school.






Stakeholders can contact [vru@london.gov.uk](mailto:vru@london.gov.uk).

## Difference Matters – at a glance

**Promoting neuroinclusion in schools. Reducing persistent absence, suspensions and exclusions.**





**1. Student voice:** Placing **students at the centre of decision-making** values their experiences and views. Bringing young people together in a group could also help to create safe social spaces and develop relationships within and across year groups.





-  **Engage 2-3 leaders per school**
-  **Provide neurodiversity training**
-  **Facilitate peer networks**
-  **Draw on specialist input**
-  **Engage school governors**

-  **Establish a safe space**
-  **Allow time to form relationships**
-  **Provide a clear purpose**
-  **Ensure school leadership buy-in**
-  **Provide external facilitation**

**2. School leadership:** Successful implementation requires senior leadership buy-in. A Leadership Action Group **ensures commitment at a senior level**, supporting accountability and helping to maintain engagement in the programme.





**3. Action planning:** Student and leadership action groups come together to agree the priority areas and develop a plan to achieve desired change, supported by a framework of good practice and resources that schools can draw on.

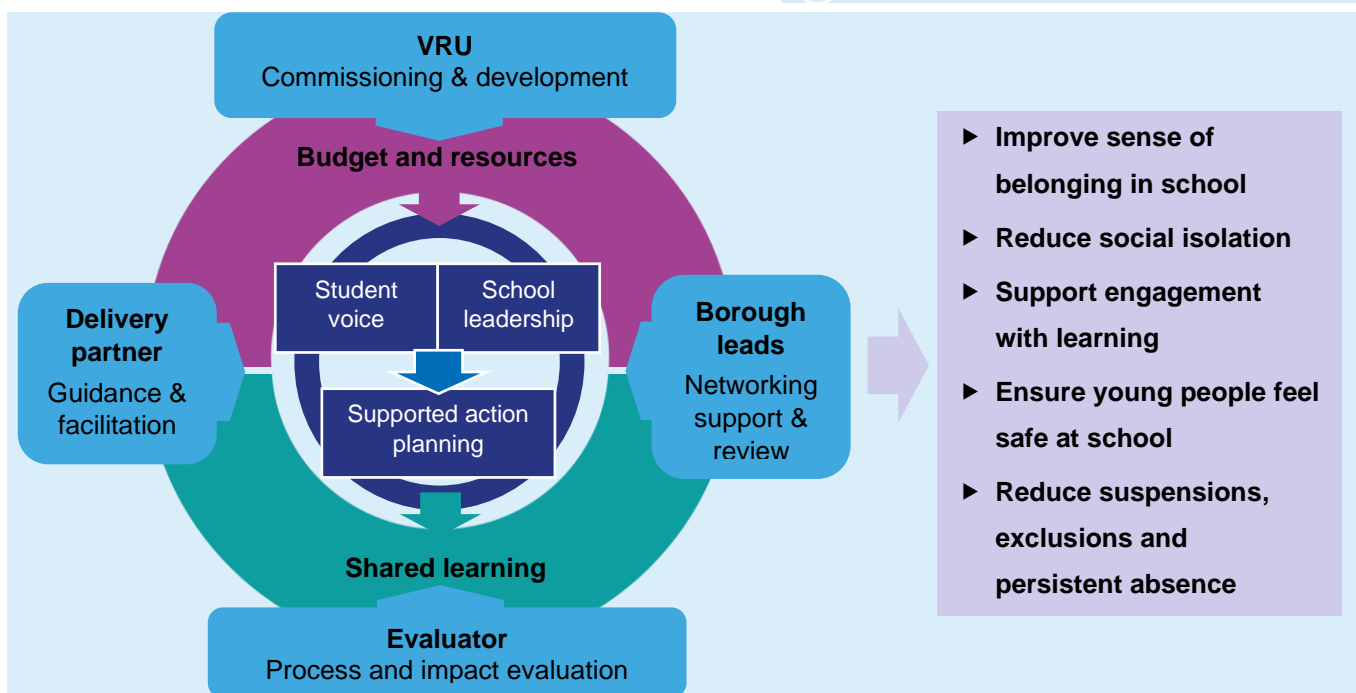
-  **Cover costs of staff time**
-  **Provide free training and facilitation**
-  **Link spending to the action plans**
-  **Focus on sustained change**

-  **Provide clear process and guidance**
-  **Thematic framework for action plans**
-  **Offer good practice examples**
-  **Boroughs support with review and feedback**

**4. Budget and resource:** Staff time should be paid for, and budget provided for implementation of the agreed action plan. There should be a focus on low-cost and long-term changes that do not rely on continued funding to support sustainability.

**5. Shared learning:** Participating schools build on evidence and best practice, innovate and adapt, and problem solve. Capturing and sharing the learning will establish a lasting legacy from the programme.

-  **Build-in shared learning**
-  **Delivery partner supports shared learning**
-  **Build a legacy of resources**
-  **Evaluate impact on school metrics**



# Introduction

The Mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) has allocated resource to develop and pilot a new programme that will promote inclusion and support neurodivergent children and young people in mainstream schools as part of its education work. The new programme, titled 'Difference Matters', is closely aligned with the [Inclusion Charter](#) which was launched in February 2024.

The broad purpose of the Difference Matters is to:

- improve school life for neurodivergent young people by making schools more neuroinclusive
- empower neurodivergent young people and promote a strengths-based approach
- reduce disproportional persistent absence, suspensions and exclusions, as part of reducing the risk of being affected by violence

In spring 2024, the VRU commissioned Ecorys and Resources for Autism to consult with stakeholders and young people and families to inform the detailed scope and approach for this programme. The consultations aimed to **understand the key challenges** for neurodivergent young people in education that lead to exclusions, suspensions and non-attendance; to **scope out existing initiatives** that aim to improve inclusion in schools; to **identify good and promising practice** and explore any **gaps** that a new programme could usefully address.

This report provides a short overview of the findings from Ecorys' consultation with experts by profession and a proposed model based on the findings from both consultation strands. A companion report, written by Resources for Autism and [found here](#), provides a more detailed overview of the findings from a survey, interviews and focus groups with neurodivergent young people and their families.

The proposed model outlined in this report offers a suggested structure for the new programme, building on key learning from other programmes, that should inform the more detailed development of the content. The model is a starting point for the commissioning and development work to be conducted between autumn 2024 and spring 2025, allowing a pilot programme to be rolled out with a selected group of schools and boroughs in early summer 2025.

## Consultation approach

**Ecorys'** consultation was carried out between April and July 2024. The research team conducted interviews, focus groups and consultation meetings with around **50 stakeholders** identified as working to deliver support or initiatives for inclusion of neurodivergent young people in educational settings. Stakeholders were identified through desk research and 'snowballing' (where the VRU or other participants signposted us to interesting areas of practice). Participants included:

- ▶ 6 voluntary sector stakeholders with a focus on neurodiversity, school improvement or youth participation
- ▶ 2 academics who had developed programmes to support inclusion of neurodivergent young people in schools
- ▶ 4 commissioners and strategic leads from NHS, local authority and education sectors
- ▶ 4 local authority representatives from London boroughs, participating in a focus group
- ▶ 6 teachers from schools across London, participating through interviews and a focus group.

The selection of stakeholders interviewed has undoubtedly shaped the consultation findings. Participants were strongly committed to improving inclusion and to supporting neurodivergent young people in education. They brought experience of both their own professional work and the challenges of delivering programmes and resources in schools. Although the research team made efforts to engage more senior leaders and teachers in the consultation, the teachers we reached through this exercise tended to be those with an existing interest and commitment around SEN and neurodivergence. Their views may, therefore, not fully reflect those of teachers more generally.

**Resources For Autism** used a combination of surveys, interviews and focus groups to gather the views and experiences of neurodivergent young people and their families. They sought to understand the priority areas that the Difference Matters programme should address and identify neuroinclusive practices that could inform the programme model and content.

- ▶ Fifty-five neurodivergent young people responded to a survey exploring academic, social life and sensory experiences at school.
- ▶ Fifteen young people and 2 parents or carers participated in focus group sessions. Participating young people ranged from 12– to 19-years in age. The focus group discussions explored barriers to school and potential solutions.
- ▶ Eight young people and 2 parents or carers took part in in-depth qualitative interviews about their experiences of school.

Following the consultation fieldwork, initial ideas for the programme model were presented to a number of forums for feedback. These included:

- ▶ the Difference Matters Advisory Group, consisting of approximately 20 stakeholders from VCSE, public sector and London Boroughs, as well as neurodivergent young people and adults with different experiences of inclusion at school
- ▶ around 15 Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) from 1 London Borough through a SENCO network event
- ▶ representatives from 7 London boroughs participating in a workshop
- ▶ 5 London schools that responded to the proposals via a short survey.

# Programme objectives

London's Violence Reduction Unit seeks to reduce violence affecting young people through prevention and early intervention. Children are safer in school. Evidence shows young people excluded from education are at higher risk of experiencing youth custody.<sup>2</sup> The VRU is committed to driving up attendance and reducing suspensions and exclusions in London's schools to reduce the risk of young Londoners being affected by violence.

## School exclusions

In England, **school exclusions** reached a record high in 2022/23. Though the rate in London is lower than nationally, London has seen a similar increase in permanent exclusion rates since 2020.<sup>1</sup> Among students with SEN but no EHCP, the rate of suspensions was nearly 4 times higher than those without SEN (24 per 100 pupils, compared to 6) and the rate of permanent exclusions was over 5 times higher (0.37 per 100 compared to 0.07).<sup>3</sup> The impact of exclusions for young people, can be severe and life-long, including risk of exposure to violence, abuse, exploitation and criminal gangs.<sup>4</sup>

## School absence

In the academic year 2022-23, rates of severe **school absence** (greater than 50% of school sessions missed) due to unauthorised absence were 2.5 times higher for secondary school students with SEN support compared to those without, and 3.5 times higher for those with an EHCP.<sup>5</sup> Increased rates of mental health difficulties among young people were considered to be one of the factors driving an increase in school absence since 2019.<sup>6</sup> In 2021, more than half (56%) of 6 to 16 year olds with SEN had a probable mental health disorder, compared with 12.5% of those without an identified SEN.<sup>7</sup>

Research shows that a significant proportion of unauthorised absence is linked to 'school distress', a term used to describe emotional distress caused by school attendance. School distress, in turn, is disproportionately experienced by neurodivergent students, with 1 study showing over 92% of young people experiencing school distress were neurodivergent.<sup>8</sup> This finding is supported by surveys of neurodivergent young people showing high proportions of young people with autism do not like school.<sup>9</sup> Understanding and reducing school distress is critical for reducing emotionally-based school non-attendance (EBSA) among neurodivergent young people.

## Understanding the pathway to exclusions and non-attendance

To inform the focus of the Difference Matters programme, we explored the challenges faced by neurodivergent young people in mainstream schools that contribute to school absence, suspensions and exclusions. The diagram on the next page summarises the issues stakeholders identified as key challenges for neurodivergent young people in many schools. These issues are reflected in the wider literature and research on neurodiversity and schools and, mirror those identified by young people in Resources For Autism's companion report.

---

<sup>1</sup> Internal VRU analysis, using Department for Education data, 2022-23.



---

“The system needs to change, if they keep focusing on supporting students with special needs - then what about the kids that aren’t diagnosed? The only reason a diagnosis was necessary for me was because I was disabled within the school environment. I’m not innately disabled, but the way that things were run was incredibly disabling.” (Resources for Autism survey respondent)

---

At the core of the challenge is a sense that mainstream secondary schools largely operate a one-size-fits-all model which does not adequately consider the different ways in which some young people experience learning, relationships and environments. The expectation that young people should adapt to fit the model required by the school and their peers, places some young people under considerable stress and can lead to school distress.

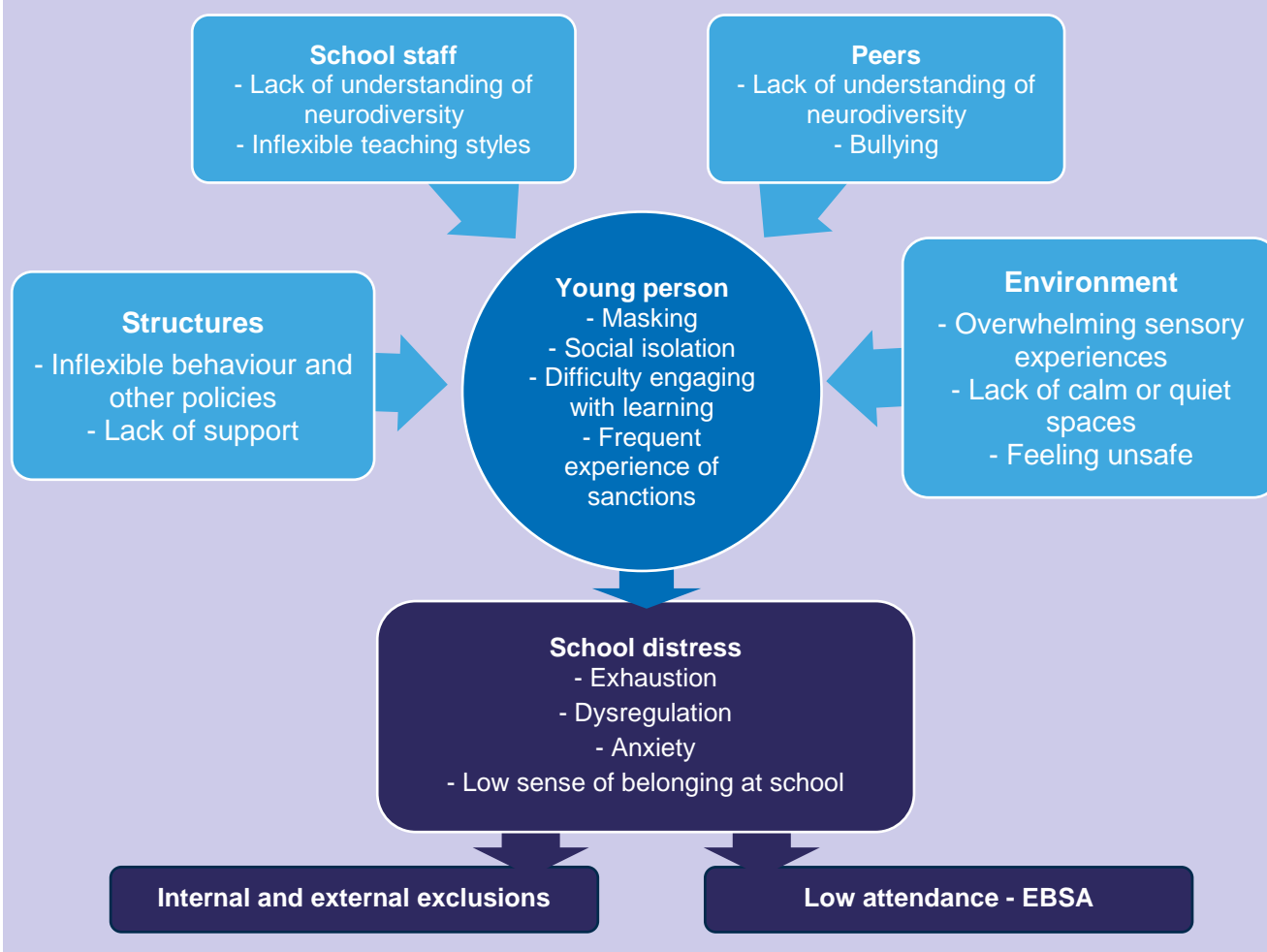
---

“[It’s] about the needs, the understanding, and: ‘that kid’s not being rude; that kid’s in pain’. It’s distress, not... being difficult”. (Strategic stakeholder)

---

While challenges identified are common for neurodivergent young people, the experiences and impacts vary considerably from person to person. Consequently, the support and flexibility required to help young people must also vary. Our findings argue that, **within each school, the views and experiences of neurodivergent young people must be at the centre of identifying the priorities and solutions for programme implementation.**

### Experience of school distress and pathways to exclusion and absence



---

“[Some neurodivergent young people] experience quite high levels of bullying. They're very socially vulnerable, so easily manipulated or coerced into antisocial behaviour. They can be excluded quite a lot because [of] how they behave when their needs aren't being met. [...]  
And then they come to us and they're very disillusioned about education. They don't trust the system, their families don't trust the system.” (Specialist provision school leader)

---

## Priorities for the Difference Matters Programme

To meet the VRU's stated purpose, Difference Matters should aim to disrupt these pathways to exclusions and non-attendance by supporting schools to improve neurodivergent young people's experience of school through:

- ▶ improved sense of belonging in school
- ▶ supported engagement with learning
- ▶ reduced social isolation
- ▶ ensuring young people feel safe at school.

# Overarching principles

As part of the consultation, we identified key principles that have shaped the proposed model. These principles are informed by the VRU's approach to violence reduction, the guidance of young advisors with personal experience of neurodiversity, and the input of participants in the consultation.



**Inclusive** – Many neurodivergent young people are diagnosed later in their school journey or after they have left compulsory education. The experiences of neurodivergent young people without a formal diagnosis or SEN support can be particularly challenging and it can take years for young people to be assessed and diagnosed.<sup>10</sup> **The Difference Matters programme should support young people who experience these challenges whether or not they have a diagnosis of neurodivergence.**

---

*"It's not about doing one thing for 1 child, or one thing for 3 or 4 children who have a label of autism or a label of ADHD. It's about taking an approach that will support those that are unidentified. And it's not going to do any harm to those that aren't." (VCSE stakeholder)*

---



**Strengths-based** – While recognising the additional challenges that neurodivergent young people face, the programme must value the strengths and experiences they bring. **Young people's voices and strengths must inform the design and delivery.**



**Empowerment and support** – Young people should feel empowered through their participation in the programme. This will mean **providing resource and support for them to shape the programme and ensuring that they do not feel exposed or exploited by it.**



**Sustainability** – The Difference Matters programme brings additional resource to schools and London boroughs that can help to explore and implement new ways of working. **The programme design must ensure that changes in participating schools can be sustained beyond this additional resource.**



**Shared learning** – The pilot phase will operate in a limited number of schools in 7 London boroughs. **The learning from their decision-making, experiences and implementation should be captured and shared to benefit more schools and young people.**



**Leadership driven** – The challenges identified above are wide ranging and **require leadership support to approve and embed changes.** Individual staff members, however committed, are unlikely to be able to bring about meaningful and lasting change without support from senior leaders.



**Flexibility for schools** – Given the nature and variety of the challenges outlined above, it is unlikely that a prescriptive intervention/s will achieve the programme's aims. **Schools need flexibility to address their own context to encourage buy-in from school leaders and maximise learning from the pilot.**

---

"It's about pushing that decision-making to [schools] [...] if you really want to affect change, people have to contextualise. They have to take into account where they are, what their limitations are, what they can do, what they can't do." (Strategic stakeholder)

---



**Fully resourced** – School budgets are stretched. For schools to fully engage and implement the programme will require adequate resourcing. **Resources should cover staff time and direct costs and should be directly linked to programme activity, not subsumed within school budgets.**



**Avoiding duplication** – Many resources and programmes are already available to schools which the Difference Matters programme should not duplicate. **The programme should support schools to engage with existing resources that meet their needs through both signposting and resourcing.**

# Selecting schools

The intention is for the programme to be delivered in 7 pre-selected London Boroughs. Within these boroughs and with the support of local authorities, schools will be invited to participate in a pilot programme. Through the consultation we sought the views of stakeholders about how schools might be selected and the type of schools that we should seek to target.



Target mainstream secondary schools, focusing on transition



Aim for schools that are willing, but not yet committed



Consider working with MATs where possible

**The Difference Matters programme should target mainstream secondary schools:** There was agreement among stakeholders that the transition between primary and secondary schools posed particular challenges for neurodivergent young people. The consultation findings suggest that Difference Matters should focus on the first few years of secondary school. Some participants felt that the programme should also look at working across primary and secondary schools to support school transition, though there are significant challenges to working across phases, including the number of primary feeder schools for each secondary school.

---

“It’s transition. So where do young people who are neurodiverse, where do we lose them? We lose them at points of transition.” (Strategic stakeholder)

---

**Schools that want to engage may not be those that most need the programme:** Stakeholders had different views about how far the programme should target schools that are already struggling with inclusion (e.g., those with higher rates of exclusion or low attendance) rather than schools that are keen to engage and implement the programme. There is a risk of *‘preaching to the converted’* (Strategic stakeholder), but equally a risk that struggling schools will not have capacity to engage and/or need to address fundamental areas before they can benefit from this programme.

---

“I think for some schools, you kind of need a base level of that ‘Quality First’ teaching to underpin before you can really start to build.” (VCSE Stakeholder)

---



---

“I think it’d be good if the programme could focus on both [i.e. willing, and, struggling schools]. I think if you work with the willing then clearly you’re going to make progress, but actually you’re not going to change London.” (Strategic stakeholder)

---

Generally, stakeholders agreed, however, that school buy-in is essential for the programme to have impact. One stakeholder suggested that highlighting the synergy of Difference Matters with other initiatives, such as the [Rights Respecting Schools Award](#) which forms part of the VRU’s [London Inclusion Charter](#) offer, might help encourage schools that are keen to be more inclusive but may not yet have made significant progress in this area. Similarly, schools that have recently set-up [Resourced Provision Bases or SEN Units](#) might be looking at ways of improving practice across the whole-school.



---

“Mainstream schools who are setting up their own units, additional resource bases and some schools are really successfully integrating them and the learnings from specialist staff within that unit. It's not just a bolt on at the side of the school, those students are really integrated and there's a lot of CPD happening around that hub.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Engaging with multi-academy trusts could provide big opportunities for impact:** Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are an important part of secondary phase education across London. In some boroughs there are very few schools that are not part of a MAT. While MAT schools are less directly influenced by their local council, there may be considerable opportunity in MATs that are keen to engage in the programme to promote and share good practice to other schools within and across MATs quickly.

---

“We've got an amazing MAT up here [...] they've taken a whole MAT approach to neurodiversity. So every single school's got the ADHD Friendly Schools award. Every single school does the Umbrella Project. They've pulled together all of their resources, they all use the same child-centred plans [...] a brilliant example of when everybody takes the same kind of approach, actually we can share learning together. We can see what that school does and mirror it in this school. And there's something about the flexibility in a MAT that allows you to do that.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Foundation Umbrella Project

**The Umbrella Project** was born out of conversations with a group of neurodivergent young people in Liverpool who wanted to celebrate their differences and educate others about neurodiversity. The project engaged with schools in Liverpool, asking them to install displays of umbrellas from ceilings as a visual celebration of neurodiversity. The project also provides schools with teaching resources, high quality training webinars for teachers, learning materials to send out to families, and facilitation for assemblies on neurodiversity.

Since its start, the Umbrella Project has spread nationally, not only in schools but also in businesses and public spaces. Some participating schools build further activities around the Umbrella Project, including themed lessons about the science of brains, as well as about individual differences and being unique. Schools choose to participate in the project, and it is often promoted from school to school, including in some MATs and consortia of schools.

A big part of the Umbrella Project's impact is creating spaces to have positive conversations and depictions of neurodiversity and other differences. The Umbrella Project takes a strengths-based approach, supporting self-efficacy among neurodivergent young people and building confidence to talk about their neurodivergence. Drawing on their creativity, young people developed a comic called The Umbrella Gang as an introduction to neurodiversity written for other young people.

---

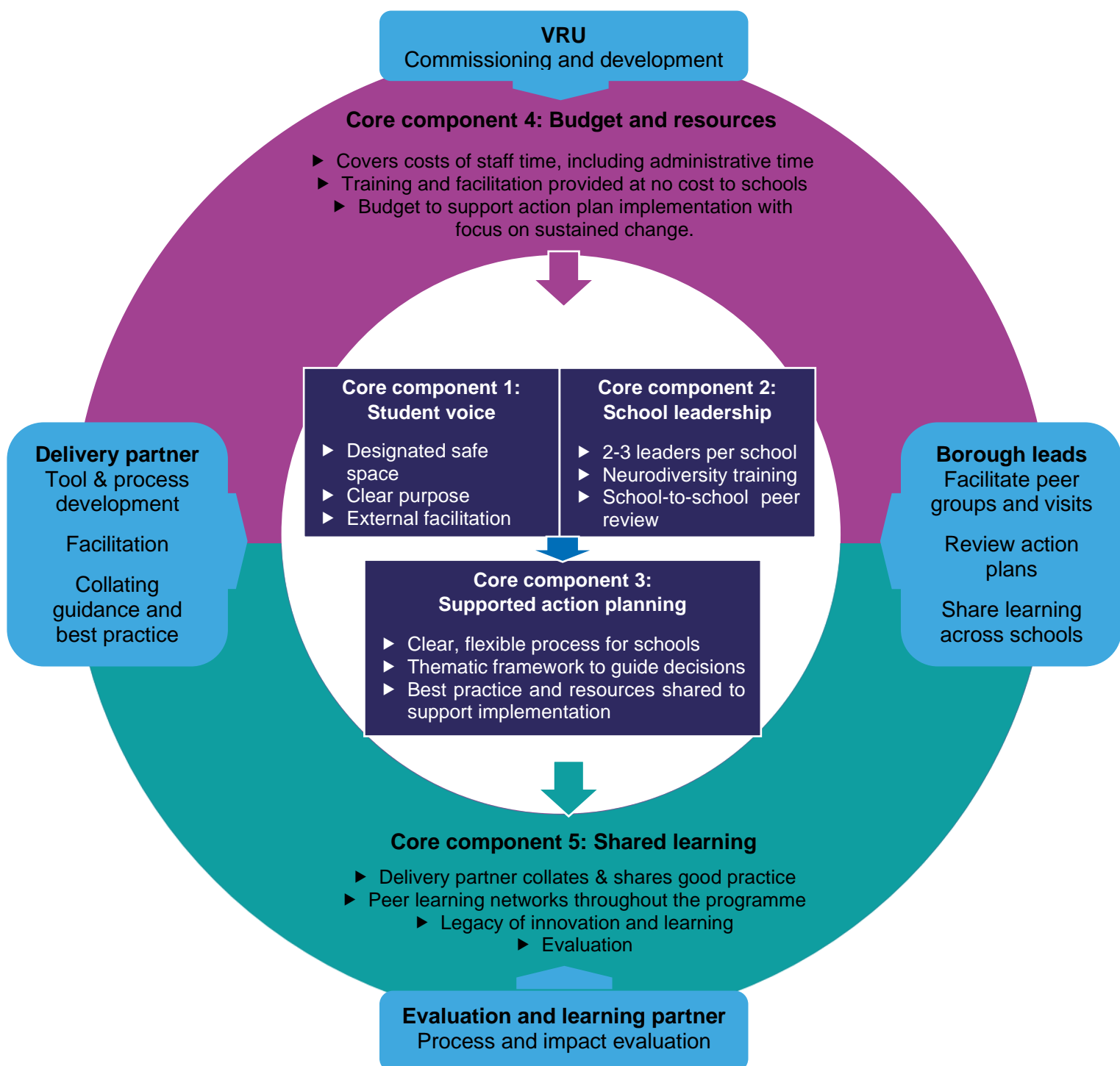
“We've had some lovely stories of younger children in primary schools. They've had an umbrella project and after the assembly a child has gone to a teacher and said 'I've got ADHD and I'd like to talk about it to my class'.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

# Programme components

## Overview

The diagram below shows an overview of the proposed model. At the centre is the activity within each school, consisting of collaboration between students and school leaders to form a bespoke action plan to improve the experience of neurodivergent young people. Built around this core is the provision of budget and additional resources to support schools and a structured approach to capturing and sharing the learning generated by the programme. Participating schools will receive support through 4 actors: the VRU as programme commissioner, a delivery partner facilitating activities in the school, borough leads providing co-ordination and review and an evaluation partner assessing process and impact. Each component is discussed further in the following sections.



## Core component 1: Student voice

There was a broad consensus in the consultation interviews that student voice was critical to understanding how the experience of neurodivergent students could be improved within a school. In keeping with a strengths-based approach, placing students at the centre of decision-making values their experiences and views. Bringing young people together in this group could also help to create safe social spaces and relationships across year groups.



Establish a safe space



Allow time to form relationships



Provide a clear purpose



Ensure school leadership buy-in



Provide external facilitation

**Start with a safe space:** Young people emphasised the importance of having a safe social space where they could spend time during breaks and lunchtimes. These may be designated spaces or other spaces in school where they felt comfortable, like libraries or music rooms. Providing this kind of space(s) for young people who want to use it for self-regulation or to alleviate stress will likely benefit those young people directly. It can also be a safe and comfortable space from which to develop a student action group, encouraging participation and helping to build relationships with peers.

---

*"We're constantly promoting the importance of self-regulation spaces across the school, you know, where are your spaces that a young person can go to if they feel really overwhelmed, that's quiet and away from the busy hustle and bustle." (VCSE stakeholder)*

---

**Provide a clear purpose and remit:** Participants should be clear on the purpose, scope and influence of the group and the commitment of the school to listen and to support the work they undertake. To support this, a framework should be developed to help guide the student action group, at least in the initial stages. This might include tools to help them think about their experiences in school, how to consult with others, what skills they could develop through the process and what support they might need.

**Allow time to form relationships:** Students should have time to form relationships with each other and to feel comfortable sharing their views. Once a safe space is identified, students should be allowed to use it based on their own interests and preferences before deciding whether to join the action group and undertaking any programme activities.

**Leadership buy-in matters:** One participant who had delivered programmes with student voice groups emphasised the importance of senior leadership buy-in. While students' ideas may not always be feasible, dismissal of their input by school leaders would quickly undermine the programme and have the potential to damage relationships and young people's engagement.

---

“[We] work with the teachers to understand social action because there have been some incidents [...] where young people, working with their teacher and with our staff, put together an amazing project plan and were so excited about it. They went to go and showcase it to the head teacher. And when the head teacher listened to it, they were just like, ‘why are you wasting my time?’” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Consider the make-up of the student action group:** Neurodivergent students in a school may have very different interests, needs and experiences of school. There is a risk that a student action group could represent only some of these student perspectives, excluding those who find it harder to engage in the programme. Difference Matters should be careful to ensure that all students feel able to contribute to the programme activity in ways that work for them. Similarly, the group does not need to be exclusively for students who identify as neurodivergent. There may be value in including ‘allies’ - friends or siblings of neurodivergent students who want to get involved.

---

“One of the targets I’ve got [...] is to create a student panel, but not the students who just we support in SEND but also maybe those who haven’t got a SEND but might have siblings who’ve got a SEND need and so can understand what things would work well. So you’ve got a mixture. I’d love to develop that. I think ...that’d be amazing.” (Teacher)

---

**Offer external facilitation:** External facilitation could help provide support for the group, maintain momentum and offer resources and skills-building. Facilitators should be carefully selected to ensure that they have a good understanding of school contexts and can develop good relationships and have credibility with school leaders as well as young people. A facilitator who is themselves neurodivergent could bring additional skills and experience and be a role model for neurodivergent young people. Facilitators would also have a role in proactively encouraging participation among a diverse group of young people and would need to be skilled and knowledgeable about ways to overcome barriers and work inclusively to engage a wide range of students.

Schools that took part in the consultation emphasised that facilitation provider/s must have strong safeguarding processes and work effectively with schools. Without a prior knowledge of the students they will work with, they will need to communicate well with the school to understand the young people’s needs. Poor relationships with the school would be a significant risk to the programme and the young people involved.

**Provide opportunities to network with other schools’ action groups:** The programme can provide opportunities for students to network with groups in other schools. This could help to reinforce the value of their experience and views, allow them to share ideas and build relationships with other young people with similar interests. Students from across schools might also get involved in showcasing the work of the programme overall through videos, podcasts<sup>11</sup> or other formats.

### London Young Ambassadors Programme

The [Young Ambassadors programme](#) is a partnership between Volunteering Matters, a national charity, and the Mayor of London. From 2021, they have worked with Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), special schools and Alternative Provision. From September 2023, they extended the offer to work with neurodivergent young people in mainstream schools.

The programme uses social action to allow young people to unlock their potential and make change in their community. Facilitators work with young people in short sessions – typically around 45 minutes but sometimes less – to support them to create their own social action projects. Students identify the issue they want to address, put together a project plan and pitch the idea to secure a grant and support to implement their ideas.

The programme provides teachers and young people with resources, including issue cards to help stimulate discussions and 'how-to guides' for teachers and students to help them to set-up social action projects. They also host London-wide summits 2-3 times a year which bring together young people from schools across London to explore an issue with expert panellists and to produce considered action plans.

Flexibility has been crucial for working with schools, including fitting around the times available with students and the length of time that the projects take. Working with school staff to get buy-in and ensure they understand the purpose of social action has also been essential.



## Core component 2: School leadership

There was strong support for engaging senior leaders directly in the programme. Participants told us that without this, working with enthusiastic staff members at a more junior level often failed to have the desired impact across the school. A leadership action group could ensure buy-in and accountability for maintaining engagement in the programme.



Engage 2-3 leaders in each school



Provide training on neurodiversity



Establish and facilitate peer networks



Consider specialist input



Establish links to school governance

---

“Making sure you've got a SEND voice on Senior Leadership Teams is really important [...] when you're looking at decisions around behaviour or anything else, it's good to have that voice there.” (Teacher)

---

**Engage 2-3 school leaders:** School leaders are busy and unexpected issues arise which can require their attention. Engaging 2-3 school leaders could help maintain progress by ensuring there is continuity if 1 person cannot take part in a specific activity, if an individual leaves and it provides internal peer support. The specific roles of the leaders engaged should be decided by each school, but as a guide, they should try to include 1 SLT member and 1 middle leader. Including the SENCO in this group may also be valuable, although stakeholders were clear that the programme should not simply be something added to their extremely heavy workload, it needs to be held across multiple leaders. Crucially, the programme model should not require all leaders to take part in every activity. Tasks could be shared to reduce the demand on each individual, while maintaining a shared commitment to the overall aims.

**Provide neurodiversity training:** The attitudes and priorities of leaders shape the school culture, and practice is more likely to improve across all school staff when the right expectations are set by leaders. Training for leaders should cover whole-school impact and approaches to help embed improvements across a school. As well as CPD, the programme might consider other development opportunities that would fit the programme well, such as action research projects that individual staff members could lead.

---

“When it's driven by senior leadership, it's more likely to be embedded. [...] I think our teachers need to understand teaching strategies [...] senior leaders need much more of that whole-school helicopter view. [...] I think if senior leaders have a package where we look at the whole school community, that holistic approach to neurodiversity, that would probably be more potentially more beneficial.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Establish and facilitate peer networks:** Constructive collaboration and peer review between schools is recognised as an effective approach to school improvement.<sup>12</sup> Through linking small groups of schools with similar school improvement aims, research suggests that staff feel supported and outcomes for students are improved.<sup>13</sup> The opportunity to visit other schools, to see different practices in action and to share ideas should support the leaders participating in this programme. Feedback from other schools facing similar constraints and challenges, may offer reassurance to leaders and enable collaborative problem solving and shared learning if they are considering something new.

Peer groups should be limited to 2-3 schools, allowing 2 leaders in a school to visit 1 other school each. These could be grouped by borough or Multi-Academy Trust, or could work across boroughs based on other school characteristics. Wider peer networking across the programme would further support shared learning (see 'Shared learning' below).

---

"I think collaboration and partnership are absolutely key because you need to get them together so they start to rub off on each other." (Strategic stakeholder)

---

**Consider specialist input:** While schools can learn together through the school-to-school peer groups, specialist input could bring another perspective, encouraging schools to consider new and more ambitious changes. Leaders from specialist provision schools or borough SEND specialists, for example, could join school-to-school peer groups to provide feedback on activities based on their experience in their own settings with neurodivergent young people. Local carer forums could also provide a parent/carer perspective. Any time from specialist settings would need to be fully resourced. Boroughs would likely be well-placed to support this input.

---

"Something we'd really like to look to in the future is more opportunities for mainstream schools to learn from specialist provisions. And I think there are instances where that's happening really effectively." (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Engage school governing bodies:** School leadership should include governing bodies who set the tone and direction for schools and hold them accountable. Schools should actively engage school governors in the programme. This may be through including a designated governor in the peer-to-peer visits and shared learning, or through reporting back to governing body meetings. Schools should be provided with resources to help explain the programme and its benefits to governors. The programme training offered to leaders could also be offered to members of the governing body where possible, recognising that, as volunteers, they may not be available to attend during a school day, so online options or video recordings may be more suitable.

## Kent Inclusive Leadership Programme

This programme, delivered by Leadership Learning Securing Excellence (LLSE), Education Development Trust (EDT) and NASEN (National Association for Special Educational Needs), is based on the idea that leadership is one of the strongest predictors of inclusive practice. It builds on the EDT's *School Partnership Programme*, based on principles of peer review.

Schools opt in to the programme, with the first cohort starting in 2022. Participating primary, secondary and all-through schools join either as existing groups, or as individual schools who are then matched with others to form groups of around 6 schools. Working to the Kent Inclusion Framework, programme components include:

- ▶ **Thematic workshops** for leaders, on topics like inclusive learning and inclusive outcomes, and skills-building workshop on peer reviewing
- ▶ **Training for 2 roles** in each school: a Peer reviewer (the Headteacher) and Improvement Champion (Senior or Middle leader)
- ▶ Meetings of small groups of schools to reflect and share best practice (**peer reviews**)
- ▶ **Tools, strategies and support** from an Inclusion Leader, focusing developing and delivering an action plan.

Activity is delivered over 4 half-terms, with further workshops in the following year to sustain momentum. The programme requires around 4 days of contact time from staff (workshops and events) spread across 4 terms, plus c. 1.5 days for the peer review cycle in each school. Schools receive £1,800 each to cover costs.

The programme requires involvement from 3 leaders in each school as this helps to manage the workload for each staff member, to recognise that responsibility for inclusion sits across leaders, not with 1 person, and to provide internal support for participating leaders. The 3 leaders attend specific activities - they do not all do everything – and are expected to collate their learning back in school.

## Core component 3: Supported action planning

The student and leadership action groups should come together to agree the priority areas to address and the activity required to achieve the desired change. The ideas and insights developed in the action groups should inform the plan, ensuring that student voice remains central. The plan itself must be feasible and should draw on existing evidence and good practice to deliver impact.



Provide a process for schools to follow



Provide a framework to focus planning



Offer examples of strategies to adopt



Boroughs to provide review and feedback

**Provide a process for schools to follow:** The action plan should be developed using principles of co-production with young people, and, to help schools, a clear process and guidance should be developed. This should be flexible enough for schools to adapt to their own context while considering feasibility and time demands. The process should include how schools could prioritise issues, assess their current context, identify potential solutions and build these into a meaningful action plan.

**Provide a framework to focus planning:** To ensure that the action planning is focused on activities that meets the aims of the programme, a framework of themes should be developed. These themes should cover the aspects of school experience that neurodivergent young people have said can be challenging. Schools should not seek to attempt to cover all identified themes and should agree 2-3 priority areas on which to focus. This has some similarities to the approach being currently piloted in primary schools as part of the Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools.<sup>14</sup>

---

“You create something that, you know, that it's a framework that surrounds it, but allows enough wiggle room for people to own it.” (Strategic stakeholder)

---

**Offer practice examples or resources that schools could use or adapt:** The programme should collate examples of good practice and available resources which schools can draw on to develop their action plan. This might include training, support or other interventions that can be ‘bought-in’ or directly implemented. These should make use of existing resources and provision wherever possible to avoid duplication. Care should be taken around the selection of resources and providers to which schools are signposted as some existing provision is controversial and some training packages are linked with frameworks and concepts that are highly divisive.

---

“I find [schools] respond better when they know somebody else has done it. So models of good practise.. saying ‘this is a secondary school that's done it and this is how they did it’.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Boroughs should be engaged:** Boroughs could have a role in reviewing and providing feedback to schools on action plans, drawing on wider expertise and identifying areas of synergy across schools. This wide-lens approach could help schools to draw on local expertise and opportunities of which they may not be aware. Borough involvement would also help ensure action plans are aligned to the programme's aims. However, it is important that the role of the borough is primarily supportive rather than directive so that changes within schools remain led by neurodivergent young people and the school leaders working with them.

## Themes for the action planning framework

**Inclusive transitions:** This theme would focus on how the transition between primary and secondary schools can be improved. Tools and guidance might include examples of good practice from other schools, encouraging work with feeder-primary schools, support to identify key challenges in transition across the different physical and social environments, social support (such as mentoring or buddying) and different approaches to teaching and learning.

**Inclusive environments:** This theme would look at existing school spaces, identify where these pose particular difficulties for neurodiverse students and identify changes that could be made. Tools and guidance might include an environmental audit tool, as used in the [Autism in Schools project](#), opportunities to see how other schools have adapted their spaces, and access to evidence on the impact of environmental design elements.

---

"I put environment again, and the whole sensory overload [...] uncarpeted corridors and echoes and smells and fluorescent lights and play time. It's relaxing for everyone else, but only adding to the stress for the autistic and some of the neurodivergent kids. And that's, you know, you're going back into class after play even more stressed than you were before." (Strategic stakeholder)

---

**Inclusive policies:** This theme would take an equity approach to reviewing school policies, exploring possible changes to ensure neurodivergent young people are not disproportionately sanctioned through being unable to comply with expectations. Tools and guidance might include the Children's Society [Behaviour Policy Checklist](#) and [UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Programme](#).

**Inclusive learning:** This theme would look at barriers to engaging with learning and how the school could reduce these for neurodivergent young people. This might include access to learning resources, adapting teaching approaches, inclusive learning experiences like targeted school trips, or additional forms of support. Tools and guidance might include examples such as individual Learner Passports which are co-developed with the student to outline learning strategies and adaptations, and signposting to [reading lists](#) and resources such as The [Good Autism Practice Guide](#).

**Inclusive support:** This theme would look at building skills and knowledge across all school staff so neurodivergent young people feel understood and supported by adults across the school. Tools and guidance might signpost schools to a range of in-person or online training provided by other organisations or toolkits such as the Royal Society of the Arts' [Inclusive and Nurturing Schools Toolkit](#).



---

“A lot of existing efforts have focused very much on teachers and teacher training and CPD, but children interact with a lot of adults; the person who's there at the front desk or dishing up the lunch or sweeping the grounds. They interact with all of those adults. And what all of those people know and believe about Differences Matters.” (Academic stakeholder)

---

**Inclusive mindsets:** This theme would look at attitudes across the school towards neurodiversity, including among students. This might include improving the understanding of neurodiversity among students through learning resources, ensuring neurodivergence is represented in the curriculum and [celebrated](#), or bringing in neurodivergent speakers and role models. Tools and guidance might include signposting to learning resources like Learning about Neurodiversity at School ([LEANS](#)), to organisations that can link schools to neurodivergent speakers such as [ADHD Foundation](#), or curriculum-linked resources that represent neurodivergence.

---

“[Schools] have facilitated a webinar or assembly and have sent information out to families. Some of the schools [...] engage in lessons about brains, about difference and about being unique. And we get some lovely stories from the schools, where children have gone ‘I've got ADHD. Can I tell you a little bit about that’ or ‘my mum's got dyslexia.’ (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Inclusive connections:** This theme would look at barriers and opportunities for positive social interactions that feel safe and supportive for neurodivergent young people. This could include reviewing the extra-curricular offer in the school to ensure it is inclusive of different needs and interests, establishing formal systems of peer support or providing different social spaces. Tools and guidance might include signposting to peer support resources like [NEST](#), and Ambitious About Autism's [Autistic and Okay Toolkit](#), to toolkits for tested mentoring models such as City Hall's [Stepping Stones programme](#) and to good practice in other schools.

---

“I think there is something lovely about an older child coming in and saying I've got the same as you and, you know, this is what I did or this is how I helped myself or this is what you can do to help yourself. So I definitely think those sort of buddy systems learning from an older person and getting that guidance from that older person is really helpful.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Inclusive communities:** This theme might look beyond the school grounds to consider how parents and the wider community could be better informed and engaged to support neurodivergent young people, as well as how the school can better support the parents of neurodivergent students. This might include engagement activities like workshops or reviewing the ways that the school engages with its wider community (through faith groups, local businesses etc) to ensure that these are inclusive. Schools could be signposted to resources like those in ADHD Foundation's [Resource Hub](#).

## Autism in Schools (AiS) and Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS)

[The AiS programme](#) worked with mainstream and special schools to build networks of support for school staff, health and care professionals. The programme aimed to improve schools' understanding of how to support autistic students and their families. It included the 'understanding myself' course to help young people gain confidence and self-awareness, and the creation of school-based support groups.

The programme saw a reduced rate of exclusions, improved child wellbeing at home, an empowered parent-carer voice, and an increased awareness and confidence among school staff around working with autism.

Among the learning from AiS was the importance of **building relationships and networks of support**, including for school staff and neurodiverse young people, of **developing learning opportunities** for schools and parent-carer forums, and of understanding and **promoting the voice** of neurodivergent young people.

The [Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools](#) (PINS) programme builds on the AiS model. It is led by Integrated Care Boards (ICB), bringing together local partners and specialists across health, schools, parent-carer forums and families to create environments that better meet the needs of neurodiverse children and young people, and facilitate their best possible outcomes.

The programme is working with primary schools and requires input from school leadership, governors and the parent-carer forum. Programme components include a:

- **menu of support** to help schools and local partnerships identify suitable approaches
- **parent-carer survey** to inform discussion between the school leadership and the Parent-Carer Forum
- **children's voice self-assessment tool** and resources
- **self-assessment tool** to help schools identify strengths and areas for development in a whole-school approach to neurodiversity.

## Core component 4: Budget resource

Stakeholders emphasised that secondary schools are stretched and adding further activity without resourcing the time needed was unlikely to bring about effective change. Schools told us that the cost and time of implementing a programme was the biggest barrier to participation. However, to sustain change and to expand provision beyond the pilot, there needs to be a focus on low-cost and long-term changes that do not rely on continued funding.



Cover the costs of staff time



Provide training, external facilitation and guidance through the central programme



Link spending on implementation to the action plan



Focus on sustained change

---

“This is a challenge across the UK; class sizes, pressure on teachers that they are so stressed that the minute they're asked to do something extra, it's like ‘something else I have to do on top of everything else that I've got to do’.” (VCSE stakeholder)

---

**Cover the cost of staff time:** Direct contact time (e.g., attending training, school visits and shared learning networks) should be funded to allow schools to cover roles as needed. Time for internal developments (e.g., meeting with the student action group and supporting implementation) should also be funded. This time should be set in advance so schools can understand the time commitment required and the programme can manage the budget per school.

Schools also told us that the time spent administering a programme \*e.g., arranging meetings, sending communications, engaging with the programme delivery partners) should be recognised. This could be done in multiple ways, such as a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR) payment or funding to cover time for a member of support staff.

---

“...because, you know, time, it's kind of making sure there's time to arrange with you know get letters out and all that kind of stuff. All the admin-y bits.” (Teacher)

---

**Provide key resources through the programme centrally:** Core components of the programme could be funded directly through a commissioned delivery partner/s working across London boroughs. This should include the collation of guidance and resources, school leader training, and external facilitation. The resources would form a legacy for the programme beyond the pilot and should be added to throughout as learning develops. By delivering facilitation across multiple schools, facilitators could also help to share learning and support wider networking.

**Direct costs of implementing the action plans should be provided:** Attaching funding to change is a way to recognise value, encourage ambition and overcome cost barriers. Once an action plan is agreed in the school, the full costs of the activities (within the allocated budget) should be covered. There may be a role for the boroughs to review costs and ensure they are fully in line with the programme's aims.

**Keep sustainable change at the heart of action planning:** As funding for the pilot will be time limited, it will be important that the programme facilitates changes that are sustainable beyond the funding period and can be rolled-out more widely to other boroughs and schools. Many of the activities that could form part of the action plans may be low-cost or free (e.g., policy reviews, internal peer support initiatives). Schools should be encouraged to consider cost-effectiveness and sustainability in their action plans.

## Core component 5: Shared learning

The programme is a pilot, offering valuable opportunities to learn about what works, the barriers and challenges, and the impact of this approach. Participating schools need to build on evidence and best practice, but also to innovate and adapt. Capturing and sharing the learning from a pilot, both during and after delivery, will be essential for establishing a lasting legacy from the programme.



Build-in opportunities for shared learning between schools



Make sharing learning part of a delivery partner's role



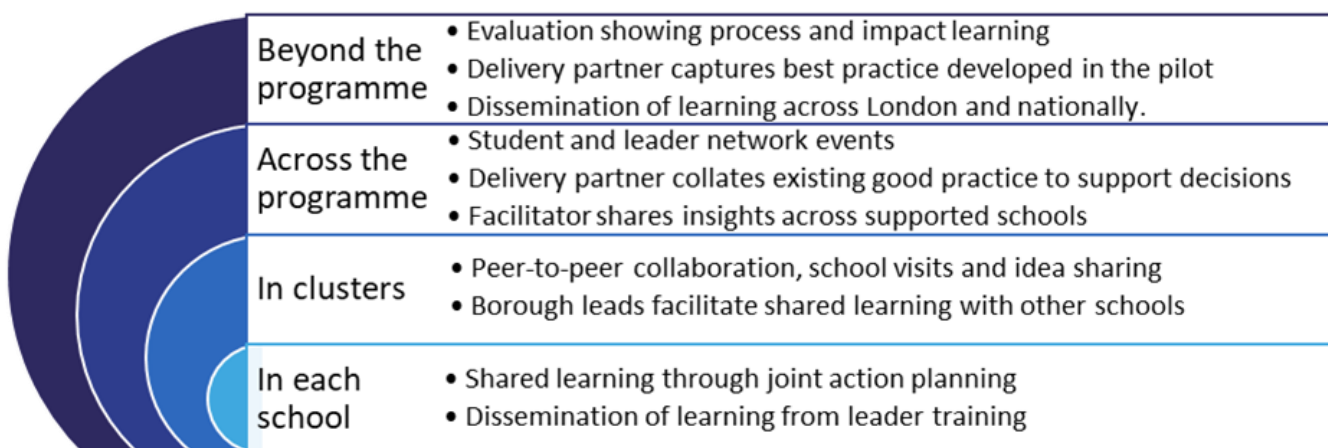
Build a legacy of resources and learning



Evaluate the programme with a focus on metrics that matter to schools

“Having come from an education background myself, when you're in a school, you know that phrase, ‘you can't see the wood for the trees’? Because you're just in it. I think when somebody comes in externally and shows you that actually you can do it and this has been done this way, I think that's when people go, ‘I could’.” (VCSE stakeholder)

**Build shared learning into each component:** The programme components are intended to provide opportunities to network, capture learning, and share good practice throughout. The figure below shows how the different components operate on multiple levels throughout the programme.



“There's really good practice in the system, but it's not necessarily being moved around and disseminated so that more schools can benefit. [...] so yeah, there's a reciprocal model. It's done with, not done to. It is very collaborative, very developmental, but it also is supportive.” (VCSE stakeholder)



**Make shared learning part of the delivery partner's role:** By commissioning the leader training, facilitation and collation of best practice and resources centrally, a delivery partner would be connected to all schools and well-placed to capture and share learning as it develops. In addition to a range of resources that could be collated in advance to support school decision making, the delivery partner could have a role in supporting schools to source additional resources and guidance during the action planning. These could then be added directly to the collated resources, creating a growing bank of examples to share during and beyond the pilot programme. The facilitator would also participate in multiple sessions with students and describe how groups tackled similar challenges and/or share solutions from other groups.

**Build a legacy of resources and learning:** The pilot would generate valuable data that could inform further roll-out or future programme development. Among these would be the priority themes identified by each school and the reasons for these, the action plans and resources required to implement them. These should be systematically captured throughout the programme to generate toolkits and guidance for other schools and boroughs, building on the examples of best practice that were identified in developing the programme.

---

*"It is about what's the product at the end of this? So, what might the school have at the end, that is something tangible that they could use and perhaps others in the wider school environment could use?" (Strategic stakeholder)*

---

**Evaluate the programme to assess impact:** During the consultation, we heard that schools are more likely to engage in a programme where they can see that it will support them to achieve the objectives that are important to them, including those that they are held accountable for under national policies. The pilot should therefore aim to demonstrate the value of the programme in achieving progress against metrics like student attendance, exclusions and wellbeing. It should also consider any changing priorities for schools in light of national policy changes, such as a new Ofsted framework.

## Conclusions and next steps

This report provides a summary of the findings from the consultations with professional stakeholders about how schools can better meet the needs of neurodivergent students through a new programme funded by the VRU.

Across neurodivergent young people, their families and professionals there was a consistent message: too often mainstream schools are contributing to high levels of distress for many students who cannot easily thrive in a one-size-fits-all environment that does not adequately understand their needs and strengths. This distress results in young people feeling unable to attend school or unable to meet the expectations that schools place upon them.

If schools want to address low attendance rates and reduce suspensions and exclusions, they need to look carefully at the experiences of neurodivergent young people in their school and explore how they can offer a more neuroinclusive environment to support all students to learn.

The model presented in this report does not offer a simple prescription for changes in a school. Instead, it offers support and guidance for schools to hear from their own students about the barriers that they face and to collaborate with them to find solutions. The model is about flexibility and listening, recognising that the experiences of 1 neurodivergent student may be very different from the experiences of others. Placing students at the centre of the programme is not only the best way to identify how their individual needs can be met in each unique school context. It is also about valuing the strengths and experiences of young people who are too often told that their perspective doesn't fit.

---

“The system needs to change, if they keep focusing on supporting students with special needs- then what about the kids that aren't diagnosed? The only reason a diagnosis was necessary for me was because I was disabled within the school environment. I'm not innately disabled, but the way that things were run was incredibly disabling.” Young person,  
Resources for Autism consultation

---

Difference Matters provides an opportunity both to support a small number of schools across London to be more neuroinclusive and to build a legacy of learning to share across London and beyond. The programme will generate insights into how schools can be helped to meet the needs of this large and growing section of the student population and offer a test bed for ambitious approaches with the scope to produce genuine change.

### Next steps

More work is needed to refine the programme model and engage a wider range of stakeholders, namely schools and borough leads, to further inform governance structures and ensure the proposed model suits schools' needs.

Below is a proposed timeline for pilot programme roll out. This would enable the VRU to:

- ▶ commission a delivery partner and a learning and evaluation partner during 2024
- ▶ identify schools and start early work in the 2024/5 academic year
- ▶ start pilot programme roll out at the start of the 2025/26 school year in September 2025
- ▶ collate and share overall learnings at the end of the 2026/27 academic year.

The VRU welcomes feedback and opportunities to collaborate with other organisations committed to improving neurodivergent young people's experiences of school. Stakeholders can contact [vrulondon@gov.uk](mailto:vrulondon@gov.uk).

Set-up year (24/25)				Phase 1: building relationships	
		Spring (1)	Spring (2)	Summer (1)	Summer (2)
		Select schools		Establish peer-to-peer school groups Neurodiversity training	
				Establish student safe space & introduce	
Year 1 (25/26)	Phase 2: action planning	Phase 3: implementation			
Autumn (1)	Autumn (2)	Spring (1)	Spring (2)	Summer (1)	Summer (2)
Agree priorities	Consult & develop action plans	Implement plans			
Peer-to-peer visits and shared learning with other schools; access to training and resources					
Shared learning and networking with other student groups; facilitated group meetings					
Year 2 (26/27)	Phase 3: implementation			Phase 4: sustaining impact	
Autumn (1)	Autumn (2)	Spring (1)	Spring (2)	Summer (1)	Summer (2)
Implement plans				Review progress & sustainability plans	
Peer-to-peer visits and shared learning with other schools; access to training and resources					
Shared learning and networking with other student groups; facilitated group meetings					

# Terminology

**SEN / SEND:** Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is a term used to refer to any child or young person who requires additional educational support because of a learning difficulty or a disability. The term Special Educational Needs (SEN) is often used interchangeably with SEND, though they may not always refer to the same group of students as it is not always clear whether SEN includes young people with any form of disability.

While neurodivergence is not the same as SEN, neurodivergent young people make up a large proportion of those students identified as SEN. Among students with an Education and Health Care (EHCP) Plan, 1 in 3 young people have autism as a primary need. One in 4 of those receiving SEN support have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), with social and emotional health difficulties and moderate learning difficulties making up the next 2 biggest groups.<sup>1</sup> Published schools' data on outcomes for SEN students are therefore a useful proxy, but do not equate precisely to neurodivergent students.

As highlighted in this report, it is also important to note that many young people are not identified as having special educational need until late in their school career or until adulthood. Many neurodivergent young people in schools will therefore not be included in this definition. This does not, however, reduce the challenges they face in schools.

**Neurodivergence:** Neurodivergence refers to thought processes and behaviours that are considered to differ significantly from what is perceived as 'typical'. The framework of neurodiversity proposes that brain functions and processes naturally differ across all people. These variations lead to a wide range of different strengths and challenges for individuals. Schools, like many institutions, have generally developed to suit those who fall within a part of that variation that is seen as 'neurotypical'.

The terms 'neurodiversity' and 'neurodivergence' do not fit a traditional medical model of neurodevelopmental disorders. A number of diagnoses are generally included in the framework of neurodivergence, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and others. In this report, we use it to refer to all young people who experience thought processes and behaviours that present additional needs within the school system, whether or not they have any formal diagnosis.

# References

---

1. Special educational needs statistics team. (2024). *Special educational needs in England: Academic year 2023/24*. [Special educational needs in England, Academic year 2023/24 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)
2. Cathro, C., Tagliaferri, G., Sutherland, A. (2023). *School exclusions and youth custody*. The Behavioural Insights Team. [Nuffield-Foundation-Exclusions-and-Youth-Custody-Report-vFinal-2023-01-17.pdf \(bi.team\)](#)
3. Department for Education. (2024). *Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, 2022-23*. [Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England, Academic year 2022/23 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)
4. APPG on knife crime. (2019). Back to school? Breaking the link between school exclusions and knife crime. [APPG-on-Knife-Crime-Back-to-School Breaking-the-links-between-school-exclusions-and-knife-crime-October-2019.pdf \(saferlondon.org.uk\)](#)
5. FFT Education DataLab. (2023). *Persistent absence by pupil group*. [Persistent absence by pupil group - FFT Education Datalab](#)
6. NESTA. (2023). *School attendance: analysing causes and impact in pursuit of solutions*. [Impact of absence on mental health and attainment | Nesta](#)
7. NHS Digital. (2021). *Mental health of children and young people in England, 2021*. [mhcyb\\_2021\\_rep.pdf \(digital.nhs.uk\)](#)
8. Connolly, S. E., Constable, H. L., & Mullally, S. L. (2023). School distress and the school attendance crisis: a story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1237052.
9. Partnership for Young London. (2023). Voices of the future: Peer research into widening access into youth services. [Voices of The Future: Peer research into widening access into youth services \(partnershipforyounglondon.org.uk\)](#)
10. Alghrani, Amel, Ali, Nabila, Allen, Katie, Bennett, Harry, Bengner, Lauren, Betts, James, Bradley, Sarah, Bond, Caroline, van den Bree, Marianne et al (2024) *An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis*. Project Report. N8 Research Partnership. [CotN SEND-AP\\_Report\\_6.pdf \(n8research.org.uk\)](#)
11. A Podcast Series by Team London Young Ambassadors. [Youth Social Action | London City Hall](#)
12. Education Endowment Foundation. (2023). *Whole-school improvement programme using self-review, peer review and school-to-school support*. [Schools Partnership Programme | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](#)
13. Farrah, M. (2017). *The power and potential of peer review The role of rigorous and impactful peer review in a self-improving system*. Schools Partnership Programme. [Ed Dev Trust SPP Impact report AW 23 5 17.indd \(b-cdn.net\)](#)
14. Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools (PINS). [Working Together Team - Partnership for Inclusion of Neurodiversity in Schools \(PINS\) \(wtt.org.uk\)](#)