



# **INMSS Stakeholder Engagement**

**Parent/Carer Focus Groups**

**and**

**Children and Young People Focus group**

**July 2025**

**Summary Feedback**

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## **Executive Summary**

This report presents insights from focus groups and interviews conducted with parents and carers of children attending Non-Maintained and Independent Special Schools (NMISS), as well as focus groups with a number of children and young people hosted at two independent special schools in Kent.

Whilst the findings highlights key issues and systemic challenges for these children and their families, it also highlights how supportive environments, personalised learning, with the right emotional and therapeutic support and meaningful engagement can help children with complex and significant needs to thrive and benefit from an inclusive education that meets their needs. These findings are intended to inform the development of a future service specification and contracting framework.

### **Parent/Carer Focus Groups**

Parents/carers were invited to attend focus groups to discuss their experiences accessing services for their children at Non-Maintained and Independent Special Schools (NMISS) in Kent. Participant information was shared beforehand as well as a power point presentation providing background information about the research and why parents/carers were being invited to contribute their views and discuss NMISS services. This provided an opportunity for any questions or concerns to be addressed.

Five parents/carers participated in two focus groups, and three were interviewed individually. Discussions covered a range of topics including the Children and Young People's Outcomes Framework, attendance, curriculum, communication, and access to SEND therapies. Participants shared detailed accounts of their children's educational journeys, highlighting both positive experiences and systemic challenges.

### **Children and Young People's Outcomes Framework**

Parents identified several key aspects from the Children and Young People's Outcomes Framework as important for their children's education and positive school experience. Some parents initially struggled to select the most important items from the framework, stating that they were all key and very much age dependent. This response reflects a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of these factors in a child's educational and developmental journey. However, by considering their own perspectives, parents were able to prioritise them in the following way:



Parents/carers overwhelmingly emphasised the importance of their children's safety, happiness and quality of life. While other aspects of the framework were mentioned, such as learning and future prospects, these were secondary, with parents/carers explicitly stating their top priority was their child's happiness and wellbeing, even above academic achievements such as GCSEs.

### **Children and Young People Focus Groups**

Focus groups were conducted at Small Haven School (Ramsgate) and Meadows School (Tunbridge Wells) on 17 and 21 July 2025. Participants included 31 young people aged 8 to 17. The discussions explored their experiences of school life, challenges, EHCP processes, and their vision for ideal education settings.

## **Key findings to inform Future Service Specification:**

Based on the insights gathered from both focus groups, the following unified recommendations are proposed for the service specification:

### **1. Plan for High Attendance**

- Include strategies to address burnout, sleep issues, and lesson engagement.
- Promote positive reinforcement, peer support, and family involvement.

### **2. Curriculum**

- Personalised, Flexible Learning
- Pupil-led enrichment and flexible timetabling.
- Include hobby-based learning and interest-driven curriculum options.

### **3. Communication**

- Maintain open and responsive channels of communication
- Embed mechanisms for pupil and voice to be heard (e.g., feedback loops, student councils).
- Include standards for pupil involvement in EHCP reviews and transparent communication.
- Require schools to track and report how pupil voice influences EHCP implementation.

### **4. SEN Therapies**

- Integrated and proactive support/ therapies at point of need
- Access to movement breaks, safe spaces, time-out strategies, and 1:1 mentoring.
- Staff to be trained in trauma-informed and neurodiverse-friendly practices.

### **5. Collaboration not isolation**

- Effective collaboration and partnerships with external services (e.g., occupational health) enhance therapeutic outcomes.

## **Primary Challenges**

### **1. Exclusion from Mainstream Education**

- **Negative Experiences:** Parents described mainstream schools as rigid, punitive, and lacking understanding of complex needs. Issues included reduced timetables, suspensions, and “shame-based” systems like traffic light behaviour charts.

### **2. Finding Suitable Placements**

- **Placement Uncertainty:** Securing appropriate post-16 education was a source of stress, compounded by personal challenges such as homelessness and health issues.

### **3. Funding for SEN Therapies**

- **Resource Gaps:** Parents reported delays and financial burdens in accessing diagnoses and therapies (e.g., for dyslexia, dyspraxia), with schools often stepping in to fill gaps.

### **4. Navigating the SEN System**

- **Emotional Toll:** The process of securing support was described as “stressful” and “emotionally draining,” affecting pupils and parents alike.
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## Appendix 1: Table of Key Recommendations with direct quotes

<b>1</b>	<b>Small class size</b>	<i>"Small classes so that staff to pupil ratio is greater, so they can really know the children."</i>
<b>2</b>	<b>Location with outdoor space</b>	<i>"Small, rural settings. There's usually a forest school available or access to things like horse riding and animal therapy."</i>
<b>3</b>	<b>Shorter/flexible school day</b>	<i>"Shorter school days, functional curriculum."</i>
<b>4</b>	<b>Functional curriculum &amp; child-led learning</b>	<i>"Flexible learning, but also an agile response on a daily basis, nurture groups as just part and parcel of how they do things."</i>  <i>"Stage not age."</i>
<b>5</b>	<b>SEND staff training</b>	<i>"Expert SEMH skills and behaviour management."</i>  <i>"The schools are able to pick it up and deliver some kind of support on the SLT side."</i>
<b>6</b>	<b>Whole family approach:</b>	<i>"And we had a conversation and then we put like little mini plans of action into place. So we're all [the family and the school] working holistically and on the same way to support him. So there's that consistency."</i>  <i>"It's the nurturing family-like environment that's been really life-changing for her".</i>
<b>7</b>	<b>Knowledge sharing between provisions</b>	<i>"And for value for money.... If KCC really wants some benefit, they really need to look at the in-reach outreach with these specialist settings. They've got the knowledge they could engage with them more if they wanted to, but they just need the impetus to just go out and do it if they really want to do inclusion properly. And they really want to try and support more children in the classroom, and they need to get that specialist knowledge and share it with mainstreams."</i>

## **Appendix 2: Stakeholder Engagement Facilitators**

Facilitator Name	Team	Engagement Type
Hannah Parathian	Kent Analytics	Parents/Carers Engagement
Mhairi Tynan	Children, Young People and Education Commissioning	Parents/Carers Engagement
Jamie Freeman	Participation and Engagement Team	Young People Engagement
Sarah Haigh	Participation and Engagement Team	Young People Engagement
Amy Nichols	Participation and Engagement Team	Young People Engagement
Claire Tanton	Participation and Engagement Team	Young People Engagement