

SENsational Tutors

Independent Research Report

SEND The Truth:

A Community Response to the 2026 Schools White Paper

SENsational Tutors

May 2026

This report presents independent qualitative and quantitative research conducted in response to the 2026 Schools White Paper, Every Child Achieving and Thriving. It has been produced to ensure that the voices of those most affected by the proposed reforms are represented clearly and independently within the public record.

Acknowledgements

This report was made possible by the generosity of the participants who gave their time, expertise, and personal experience across two online panels. Many of those who participated did so while managing the daily pressures of caring for or educating SEND children, and many are SEND themselves. Their support and engagement is deeply appreciated.

Abbreviations

AP	Alternative Provision
EBSA	Emotionally Based School Avoidance
EHC / EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EHE	Elective Home Education
EOTAS	Education Other Than At School
ISP	Individual Support Plan
LA	Local Authority
NAHT	National Association of Head Teachers
NEU	National Education Union
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SNJ	Special Needs Jungle
SOCR	Save Our Children's Rights
TES	Times Educational Supplement

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Executive Summary

The 2026 Schools White Paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, sets out the government's plans for long-term education reform in England, with significant proposed changes to how SEND support is delivered.¹ Released in February 2026 alongside a formal consultation closing on 18 May 2026, the proposed reforms have generated widespread concern from SEND families and educators, across issues such as student wellbeing and teacher workload. This report was produced by SENsational Tutors to capture independent, community-led evidence on how those most affected by the proposed reforms feel about their potential impact.

The research question was:

How do individuals affected by the Schools White Paper feel about its impact? What are their main concerns and what, if anything, do they want to see done differently?

The research was conducted across two online panels held in early 2026. Quantitative survey data were collected as part of the panel registration process and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. There were a total of 157 survey respondents. These included parents (48.4%), teachers (23.6%), SEND advocates (10.2%), local authority representatives (3.8%), and carers (1.9%), alongside a range of other professionals including specialist lawyers. Qualitative data was gathered during two online Teams webinars, with 19 participants.

Qualitative data from the panel discussions were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), and the worked example by Byrne (2022).²³⁴

¹ [Every child achieving and thriving \(HTML version\)](#) - Department for Education

² Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). [Using thematic analysis in psychology](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

³ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). [Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis](#). *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597.

⁴ Byrne, D. (2022). [A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis](#). *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391–1412.

The quantitative findings show that confidence in the proposed reforms is low across the entire sample. The most commonly given response on all three confidence questions (confidence in outcomes, understanding of SEND needs, and practical implementation) was 1 out of 5: not at all confident. Parents scored lower than teachers across every measure tested, and this finding was significant, with medium to large effect sizes throughout. Furthermore, teacher confidence scores were also at the lower end of the scale (median = 2 to 2.5), suggesting the negative perception is broadly unanimous. 70.7% of respondents expressed concern about the White Paper's focus on mainstream school, 72% expressed concern about the lack of EOTAS information, and 65.6% expressed concern about potential restrictions on elective home education, suggesting the perceived importance of retaining and strengthening alternative education outside of school settings. When asked to identify their single most important concern, 40% of respondents selected children's mental wellbeing, placing it above school funding, inclusion, EOTAS, and teacher workload combined.

The qualitative findings are organised into three themes. The first, '*A Recipe for Disaster*': *Practical Issues with the Reforms*, captures participants' scepticism about whether the reforms can be practically delivered. This theme identifies perceptions that the reforms will become an unworkable burden on an already overstretched workforce, with inadequate funding, an unrealistic timeframe, and a standardised framework incompatible with the diversity of SEND needs. The second theme, '*Lost Lifelines*' - *Losing Legal Protections and Education That Works*, addresses the removal of legal enforceability through the replacement of EHCPs with ISPs, the vital role of EOTAS and alternative provision as long-term education solutions rather than temporary measures, and the dangers of forced return to mainstream settings. The third theme, *The Trauma of Mainstream*, elaborates on the concern surrounding SEND mental health in schools found in the quantitative data. It highlights how mainstream education is experienced by many SEND children as a site of emotional harm, and that the reforms, by embedding mainstream as the primary aspiration and measuring success through academic attainment alone, risk deepening that harm.

This report makes seven recommendations to the Department for Education, addressed to specific actors and grounded directly in the evidence. They call for:

- the preservation of legal enforceability in SEND provision
- the recognition of EOTAS, EHE, and alternative provision as legitimate long-term educational settings
- urgent action on workforce capacity and training
- adequate funding and a realistic implementation timeline
- genuinely person-centred provision that rejects rigid categorisation
- a broadened definition of educational success that includes wellbeing outcomes
- embedding of lived experience in policy design and review

The government's consultation closes on 18 May 2026. The evidence presented here, in the voices of the families, educators, and young people who live and work within the SEND system every day, represents an urgent and independent contribution to that process.

Key Findings at a Glance

Key quantitative findings:

- **Children's mental wellbeing was the top concern** - identified as the single most important issue by 40% of respondents, placing it above school funding, inclusion, EOTAS, and teacher workload combined.
- **72% of respondents are concerned about the lack of EOTAS information in the White Paper** - with fewer than 2% reporting no concern, making this the most consistent concern across the entire survey.
- **Parents are less confident in the reforms than teachers across every measure** - on overall feeling, outcomes confidence, understanding of SEND needs, and practical implementation, parents consistently scored lower than teachers at statistically significant

levels, with medium to large effect sizes. However, teachers also only reached the lower end of the scale on every measure.

- *Across the full sample, the most commonly given answer on all three confidence questions was 1 out of 5 - not at all confident - with median scores of 1 to 2 across outcomes, understanding of SEND needs, and practical implementation.*

Key qualitative themes

- ***'A Recipe for Disaster': Practical Issues with the Reforms*** - exploring the practical issues with implementation, including increasing the burden on the workforce, inadequacies in the funding and timeframe, and issues with the standardisation of SEND needs.
- ***'Lost Lifelines' - Losing Legal Protections and Education That Works*** - highlights concerns regarding a loss of legal protections, threats to EOTAS and alternative provision, and the potential for return to harmful settings.
- ***The Trauma of Mainstream*** - highlights the traumatic impact of mainstream education on SEND children, the emphasis on academic outcomes over child wellbeing, and the emotional costs on SEND parents and educators.

1. Introduction

1.1 What is the 2026 Schools White Paper?

Released on 23 February 2026, the Schools White Paper, entitled *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, set out the government's plans for long-term education reform in England, with a particular focus on outcomes for SEND young people.

According to the paper, it was developed in response to systemic inequalities and pressures identified within the English education system, including rising school absence, widening attainment gaps, and poor pupil wellbeing.⁵ Other sources suggest that “pressure from SEND deficits on local authority budgets” may have been a key factor in reevaluating SEND education.^{6,7}

The White Paper sets out the government's plans for reforming the education system, particularly in relation to SEND education. This includes aims to halve the disadvantage attainment gap, raise average GCSE attainment across the system, and create a more inclusive mainstream school system.

The White Paper, published alongside a separate consultation document (*SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First*), proposes a fundamental reshaping of how SEND support is identified, delivered, and funded.⁸ The overarching aim is to create a 'one education system' that integrates SEND provision within the mainstream.

Five reform principles underpin the proposals: Early, Local, Fair, Effective, and Shared. The proposals are structured around three layers of support:

- Universal - for all children
- Targeted (including Targeted Plus) - structured interventions within mainstream

⁵ [Every child achieving and thriving \(HTML version\)](#) - Department for Education

⁶ [SEND reform: putting children and young people first \(HTML version\)](#) - Department for Education

⁷ [Government commits to paying 90% of councils' SEND deficits](#) - County Councils Network

⁸ [SEND reform: putting children and young people first \(HTML version\)](#) - Department for Education

- Specialist - for children with “complex needs” via EHCPs

Specific examples of proposed changes include:

Individual Support Plans (ISPs)

A new statutory duty will require all nurseries, schools and colleges to record and monitor the special educational needs and provision for children needing Targeted or Specialist support in an Individual Support Plan, developed collaboratively with parents. This replaces the EHCP as the primary documentation tool for the majority of children with SEND.

Specialist Provision Packages

For children with the most complex needs, a new set of nationally defined, evidence-based Specialist Provision Packages will be introduced, developed and reviewed by an independent expert panel. These will guide eligibility for EHCPs and set out what support children should receive.

Experts at Hand Service

A new £1.8 billion service providing access to speech and language therapists, Educational Psychologists and other professionals directly within mainstream settings.

Inclusive Mainstream Fund

£1.6 billion over three years to equip and fund mainstream schools to meet SEND needs more effectively, alongside building new places in inclusion bases within mainstream settings and creating new specialist school places.

SEND Practitioners in Family Hubs

Every Best Start Family Hub will have a dedicated SEND practitioner to identify and support children's needs early.

The government has argued that these changes have been adopted to resolve systemic inequalities affecting SEND children and their families. Justifications for these changes have included:

- Increase in specialist-school-educated pupils, which the paper presents as evidence of mainstream inclusion having broken down, rather than of rising complex need.
- The paper argues that mainstream inclusion produces better outcomes, citing internal government analysis showing that children with SEND in mainstream schools achieve, on average, half a grade higher in both English and maths GCSEs compared to comparable children in special schools.⁹
- Inequality in the system, with the level of support a child receives often dependent on their family's circumstances.
- Heavy reliance on EHCPs is identified as having diverted resources away from early intervention, with educational psychologists spending too much time on paperwork rather than direct support.¹⁰

The White Paper positions its reforms as restoring fairness, improving outcomes, and rebuilding family confidence in the educational system.

1.2 What Was the Response to the Schools White Paper?

Responses to the White Paper have been mixed. While several prominent organisations acknowledged the scale of the reforms as a step in the right direction, the proposals have faced widespread criticism from SEND advocacy groups, journalists, parents, and educators, particularly in relation to SEND reforms.

Responses in Favour

⁹ [GCSE outcomes for pupils with EHCPs: comparison of mainstream and special schools](#) - Department for Education

¹⁰ [Every child achieving and thriving \(HTML version\)](#) - Department for Education

Several prominent organisations, including the Education Endowment Foundation and the Sutton Trust, acknowledged the scale of the reforms as a step in the right direction.¹¹¹² They praised the emphasis on reducing attainment gaps, but highlighted the need for effective implementation. Further positive responses gave qualified praise to specific areas of the White Paper's proposals:

- The Council for Disabled Children welcomed the commitment to retain statutory EHCPs.¹³
- School leaders' union NAHT recognised the potential of the inclusive mainstream principle and welcomed the increased investment, but highlighted the need for further scrutiny and recognition of pupils who require support in a specialist school.¹⁴
- The Local Government Association also welcomed the increase in funding, but questioned the compulsion of schools to join trusts.¹⁵
- In a round-up from the TES Magazine, educators reported appreciating the vision towards inclusive practice in mainstream schools, but questioned the delivery of the plans and the potential for increased pressure on mainstream schools.¹⁶

Critical Responses

Despite areas of support, the White Paper has faced widespread criticism from SEND advocacy groups, journalists, parents, and educators, particularly around SEND reforms:

- Leading campaign coalition Save Our Children's Rights (SOCR) collaborated with other organisations on a coordinated national demonstration. SOCR highlighted several core

¹¹ [Professor Becky Francis responds to the schools White Paper](#) - Education Endowment Foundation

¹² [Sutton Trust response to Schools White Paper reforms to support disadvantaged young people](#).-- The Sutton Trust

¹³ Kilraine, L. (2026). [Children with current highest level of SEND support set to fall from 2030](#). ITV News.

¹⁴ Department for Education (DfE). (2026). [£4Bn to Transform SEND Support: What the Schools White Paper Means for Every Setting](#). FE News.

¹⁵ [Schools White Paper, Every child achieving and thriving – LGA briefing](#). Local Government Association.

¹⁶ Peirson-Hagger, E., & Amass, H. (2026). [Schools White Paper: the sector reacts](#). TES Magazine.

concerns about the White Paper, including the weakening of individual needs assessments and the right to an EHC needs assessment and plan.¹⁷

- Award-winning parent-led SEND news website Special Needs Jungle published a detailed response questioning the enforceability of ISPs, the limitations to EHCP eligibility, lack of parental involvement, and a rigid criteria for 'success' in specialist schools.¹⁸ SNJ also criticised the funding as being a large number on paper, but not enough to pay for an extra teaching assistant in an individual school.¹⁹
- Down's Syndrome charity 21 Together noted that while the aspiration for more inclusive mainstream schools is positive, much more detail is needed about how this will be delivered in practice, particularly in relation to the limited information on the impact on access to EHCPs.²⁰
- The Down's Syndrome Association praised the government's ambition for inclusion, but criticised the lack of detail relating to 'individual, person-centred' education provision. They highlighted the importance of EHCPs, and raised concerns about the lack of clarity surrounding parents' legal rights in relation to ISPs, and the introduction of nationally defined Specialist Provision Packages.²¹
- At the NEU teaching union's annual conference, Green Party Leader Zack Polanski stated that the White Paper would 'entrench failings' within education.²²
- Shadow Education Secretary Laura Trott criticised the lack of clarity on EHCPs and teacher retention, and pressure on state schools and neglect of special schools and the independent sector.²³

¹⁷ [National Demonstration Planned to Protect and Strengthen SEND Legal Rights](#) - Disability Rights UK

¹⁸ [The SEND reforms in the Schools White Paper reveal rights given, and rights stripped away.](#) - Special Needs Jungle.

¹⁹ Bloomer, A. (2026). [SEND: Schools white paper includes £4 billion in additional funding for reforms.](#) Learning Disability Today.

²⁰ [SEND Reform: What the Schools White Paper means for children with Down's syndrome.](#) - 21 Together.

²¹ [Down's Syndrome Association response to proposed SEND reforms in Schools White Paper.](#) - Down's Syndrome Association.

²² Turner, C. (2026). [Polanski: White Paper will 'entrench failings' in school system.](#) - TES Magazine.

²³ Trott, L. (2026). [The SEND reforms are not a recipe for inclusion, but for disaster](#) - TES Magazine

Broadly speaking, educators wrote more positively about the proposed reforms, with major concerns focusing on implementation and pressure on schools. Meanwhile, parents, politicians, and SEND advocates were more critical, with a key concern being the impact on SEND children.

1.3 The Broader Research Context: SEND Education and Trauma

As discussed, the 2026 Schools White Paper was created within a broader context of school absences and poor student mental health. According to data from the Department for Education, 18.14% of pupils were persistently absent from school in the 2024/25 academic year.²⁴

However, school absences do not exist in a vacuum. One concept that must be considered before exploration of the report's findings is that of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

EBSA, defined as significant and chronic anxiety associated with the school environment that triggers avoidant behaviour, has become well established as a major driver of school absence among SEND children. In a large-scale study of 947 parents of children experiencing school attendance difficulties, Connolly et al. (2023) found that in 94.3% of cases, school attendance problems were underpinned by significant emotional distress. Crucially, 92.1% of the children affected were described as neurodivergent, and 83.4% as autistic, with the odds ratio of autistic children experiencing school distress calculated at 46.61 compared to neurotypical peers.²⁵

Recent research has also highlighted the specific factors that have contributed to SEND children's negative experiences of education, particularly for autistic children. These studies suggest a need to move away from terms like "avoidance" and "refusal", which place focus on

²⁴ [Pupil absence in schools in England](#) - Department for Education

²⁵ Connolly, C., Constable, H., & Mullally, S. L. (2023). [School distress and the school attendance crisis: A story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need](#). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1237052.

the child's behaviours, rather than the impact of the educational environment on child mental wellbeing. In their retrospective audit on the case notes of 20 autistic children who had been unable to attend school for a minimum of three months, Siggers and Day (2024) found that all the children experienced symptoms associated with autistic burnout, including chronic exhaustion and heightened sensory sensitivities.²⁶ Furthermore, in their qualitative study of 31 individuals with experience of school anxiety, Fisher et al. (2025) found that "neuro-normativity", the perception of Neurotypicality as "superior and default", was found to be central to the experiences of those with school anxiety.²⁷ This study found that it was essential to reinterpret "school anxiety and non-attendance as rational responses to systemic harm". These studies suggest a developing awareness of the negative impact that mainstream education can have on the lives of SEND children and young people.

1.4 Why This Report is Important

Although many organisations have shared their perspectives about the White Paper, and many sector-led panels have been held, a data-led report exploring the responses of affected parties at scale has not been created. This means there is little to no clear data on the perspectives of those on the frontlines of SEND parenting and education.

Furthermore, whilst the government has established an official consultation process for the White Paper, this has also faced criticism. In February 2026, SEND parent Melissa Hayhurst issued a letter before action challenging the absence of consultation questions on two of the most contentious aspects of the reforms: weakening of SEND Tribunal powers and the movement of legal responsibilities from local authorities to schools.²⁸ The government's legal response stated that there was no duty to consult on these aspects because the decisions had

²⁶ Siggers, G., & Day, B. (2024). [Beyond School Avoidance: Recognising, Identifying, and Addressing Autistic Burnout in Children](#). *BJPsych Open*, 10(S1), S169-S169.

²⁷ Fisher, E., MacLennan, K., Mullally, S., Rodgers, J., & Tzemou, E. (2025). ['I Can't Go to School, It Isn't a Won't': Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Children's School Anxiety Within the UK's Systemic Crisis](#). *Neurodiversity*, 3.

²⁸ Moore, C. (2026). [Legal challenge launched against government SEND proposals that "significantly weaken the legal rights of children and young people"](#) - Special Needs Jungle

already been made. Despite a subsequent clarification that they will consider comments on all aspects of the reforms, this position was condemned as rendering the consultation process inadequate and unclear.²⁹

Therefore, a report created from within the SEND community itself is needed to ensure that affected parties can have their voices heard in a safe environment, and that independent, community-driven evidence is represented clearly within the public record.

²⁹ Tirraoro, T. (2026). [DfE backtracks over consulting on planned SEND legal changes. Parents MUST respond to the consultation to say Not in Our Name!](#) - Special Needs Jungle

2. Methodology

2.1 Epistemological Positioning

This study adopts a critical realist epistemological perspective, which asserts that an objective reality exists independently of human perception, but our understanding of it is always mediated by social, cultural, and linguistic structures. Critical realism is particularly useful for social research as it distinguishes between observed experiences and the underlying causal mechanisms that generate them (Connelly, 2001).³⁰ It therefore enables analysis of both the empirical accounts of SEND families and professionals and the deeper structural conditions that shape these experiences (Monaghan, 2024).³¹

Consistent with critical realism's emphasis on reflexivity, the research also acknowledges that data interpretation is necessarily influenced by the researcher's positionality. This requires careful reflection on how assumptions and analytical decisions may shape findings.

2.2 Participant Eligibility and Recruitment

Participants were anyone who identified as an affected party of the Schools White Paper's proposed SEND reforms.

Participants were recruited through several methods:

- Social media posts were created on the SENsational Tutors Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn pages.
- Meta ads were set up for the first panel. These were not used for the second panel due to logistical constraints.
- Press releases were shared across several education-sector websites.

³⁰ Connelly, J. (2001). [Critical realism and health promotion: Effective practice needs an effective theory](#). *Health Education Research*, 16(2), 115–120.

³¹ Monaghan, L. F. (2024). [Employing critical realism within and beyond social studies of health: Tenets, applications, possible future research and action](#). *Journal of Critical Realism*, 23(3), 274–291.

- Several panelists who were professionals in fields we felt it important to reflect in this report were recruited purposely through direct email or WhatsApp message by the lead researcher. This was done to ensure a range of professional expertise, and encourage further recruitment to the panels. For example, a SEN lawyer was recruited in this way. These panellists have been included as participants within the qualitative section of the report.
- Tutors and panellists were encouraged to share information about the panels within their communities.

To be eligible for the panels, participants were required to read through the Participant Information Sheet [Appendix B] on the website and provide consent during the panel registration process. The Participant Information Sheet was available at the bottom of the landing page for each panel on the SENsational Tutors website. Participants were directed to read this page before providing consent as part of the registration process. Participants who provided blank responses or duplicate submissions were excluded. Ten participants who selected 'Prefer not to say' across all opinion-based questions were excluded from the analysis.

The first panel was framed as a 'Teachers and Local Authorities' panel, and the second as a 'Parents and Carers' panel, though all participants were eligible to attend either, or both, panels regardless of their role.

Pseudonyms were provided for all participants quoted or referenced within the report. As there were a large number of participants within the webinars, it was not possible to include quotes from all 19 participants in the report, though their commentary informed the analysis. For transparency, 12 of these participants had working relationships with or were clients of SENsational Tutors.

Participant pseudonyms and roles are listed below:

Name	Role
Wendy	SENCO
Carla	AP Tutor
Jennifer	Local Authority
Laura	Parent
Rachel	AP Provider
Suzie	Parent
Chris	Advocate / Legal
Lorraine	AP Provider
Pauline	Parent
Belinda	Parent
Beth	Advocate and Former SEN Student
Ellie	Parent
Moira	Parent
Michael	SEN Student

Steven	Local Authority
Tracey	Tutor
Tim	Legal
Emily	Parent
Fred	Parent

2.3 Data Collection

The survey questions [Appendix A] were included as mandatory questions within the panel registration process, with a 'Prefer Not To Say' option provided for those who did not wish to answer specific items. Completion of the survey was therefore a prerequisite for panel attendance. Participants provided consent via a checkbox, which confirmed that they had read the Participant Information Sheet available on the SENsational Tutors website, and were informed they could withdraw their data at any time up until 15th April. Participants also provided consent via checkbox to panel discussions being recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. Survey questions were developed by the lead researcher, with feedback from the SENsational Tutors team. The aim of the questions was to gain an understanding of participants' confidence, anxiety, and key concerns regarding the white paper, as well as their demographic information.

Procedure

Participants filled in the survey questions as part of the panel registration process. Once completed, they received an automated email with a link to the meeting. On the day of the panel, participants then joined via Teams. Once the panel began, participants were accepted into the call from the lobby. Moderated by the participant referred to as "Rachel", the panel was

semi-structured, with participants invited to share further perspectives on the topics raised in the survey, including ISPs, EHCPs and EOTAS. However, the discussion was also left open for participants to raise other topics that they felt were relevant.

Participants would use the “Raise hand” tool to indicate they wanted to speak, and then their microphone was enabled. Video could also be turned on if the participant wished, but this was optional.

Both panels were conducted via Microsoft Teams as webinars. Each session lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. The panel facilitator (participant referred to as “Rachel”) confirmed with other participants that the session would be recorded for the purposes of data analysis only, before recording commenced.

2.4 Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were collected via the panel registration survey and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 31.0.0.0 (117) by the second researcher. Prior to analysis, a systematic data cleaning process was undertaken by the lead researcher.

Data preparation and screening

Data were screened prior to analysis to ensure accuracy and suitability for statistical testing. Cases with missing responses were handled using pairwise deletion, such that participants were included in analyses where they had provided complete data for the variables of interest. Frequency distributions were examined for all categorical variables, and descriptive statistics were calculated for ordinal variables derived from Likert-scale responses.

Measurement and scale treatment

Responses to attitudinal items (Questions 6–9 and 13) were measured on 5-point Likert scales. As these data are ordinal and were not assumed to be normally distributed, non-parametric

statistical tests were employed throughout. Central tendency and dispersion were summarised using medians (Md) and interquartile ranges (IQR), alongside means and standard deviations (SD) for descriptive purposes.

Descriptive analysis

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all categorical survey items (Questions 1–5 and 10–14). For Likert-scale items, descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode, standard deviation, and IQR) were computed. A histogram was generated to visualise the distribution of responses to overall sentiment toward the Schools White Paper.

Inferential analysis

Group differences by respondent characteristics

To examine differences in attitudes and perceptions across groups, a series of non-parametric tests were conducted:

- The Kruskal–Wallis H test was used to assess differences across variables with more than two independent groups (e.g., main role, school type, school age range).
- Where significant effects were identified, post hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using Dunn–Bonferroni tests to control for Type I error.

Two-group comparisons

For comparisons involving two independent groups (e.g., EOTAS vs. non-EOTAS), the Mann–Whitney U test was used.

Effect sizes

Effect sizes were calculated to assess the magnitude of significant findings. For Kruskal–Wallis tests, eta-squared (η^2) was reported. For pairwise comparisons and Mann–Whitney U tests,

effect size r was calculated. Effect sizes were interpreted using conventional thresholds (small $\approx .01$, medium $\approx .06$, large $\geq .14$ for η^2 ; and small $\approx .10$, medium $\approx .30$, large $\geq .50$ for r).

Significance threshold

Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Where multiple comparisons were conducted, Bonferroni adjustments were applied to reduce the likelihood of Type I error.

2.5 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from the panel discussions were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2022).^{32,33} The analysis was conducted in accordance with the phase descriptions outlined by Byrne (2022), and progressed iteratively through familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, construction of candidate themes, and review and refinement of those themes in relation to the full dataset and the research question.³⁴

The researcher's positionality, including lived experience of autism, ADHD, and school trauma, was acknowledged throughout the analytic process as a resource that informed interpretive sensitivity, rather than a bias to be neutralised. However, reflexive notes were maintained throughout to ensure that diverse perspectives within the community were included.

The panel transcripts, created automatically by Microsoft Teams, were downloaded, and the researcher initially read through the transcript to ensure accuracy and add participant pseudonyms, but without creating codes at this stage. During a second read of the two transcripts, the researcher manually recorded proposed codes with the "Suggestions" tool in

³² Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). [Using thematic analysis in psychology](#). *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

³³ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). [Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis](#). *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597.

³⁴ Byrne, D. (2022). [A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis](#). *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391–1412.

Microsoft Word. After this stage, the researcher created a separate document to arrange and review codes, and then group these together into potential themes. 14 rough themes were generated. However, to refine the themes and subthemes further, the researcher used the Large Language Model (LLM), Claude, to speed up the coding process. As Cevik and Abu-Zidan (2025) argues, LLM usage within qualitative research needs to be managed carefully, and requires human judgement “to ensure methodological rigor, validity, and accuracy.”³⁵ In line with this, the researcher reviewed the LLM generated themes, repeated the generation process several times, selected the themes and theme names that were most relevant to the report, and edited and developed them to ensure accuracy and meaningfulness. Finally, participant quotes were chosen to best illustrate the themes.

The final thematic structure, developed at Phase 4 and 5 of the analysis, comprises three themes, each with associated sub-themes. These are presented in full in Section 4.

2.6 Researcher Positionality

The lead researcher, Milly Allinson, has lived experience of autism, ADHD, and school trauma, and was home-schooled from the age of nine, with a brief attempt at returning to mainstream school at the age of thirteen. She holds an MSc in Psychology (Distinction) from Manchester Metropolitan University.

This positionality is acknowledged as directly relevant to the quality and depth of this research. The lead researcher's personal experience of the SEND system enabled a level of understanding and rapport with participants that supported richer and more candid data. However, reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytic process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data rather than personal experience alone. The second researcher also reviewed the analysis to further reduce the risk of bias.

³⁵ Cevik, A. A., & Abu-Zidan, F. M. (2025). [Utilizing AI-Powered Thematic Analysis: Methodology, Implementation, and Lessons Learned](#). *Cureus*, 17(6), e85338.

The second researcher is a current postdoctoral researcher specialising in neurodiversity research.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

The following ethical considerations were addressed throughout the design, data collection, and analysis process.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. The Participant Information Sheet, available on the SENsational Tutors website on the landing pages for both panels, set out the purpose of the research, how data would be collected and used, and participants' right to withdraw. Consent was provided actively through a checkbox within the panel registration process. Participants were informed that completion of the survey was a requirement for panel attendance, and that panel sessions would be recorded for analytical purposes only. Verbal confirmation of consent to recording was sought by the panel facilitator at the start of each session before recording commenced.

Right to withdraw was communicated clearly to all participants within the Participant Information Sheet and the registration process. Participants were provided with details of how they could request the removal of their data from the study following their participation. For more details, please refer to the Survey Questions [Appendix A] and Participant Information Sheet [Appendix B].

Pseudoanonymisation In the qualitative results section, participants are identified only by pseudonym and role. Interview transcripts were also pseudonymised. Panel recordings were used solely for the purposes of data analysis and transcription, and were not shared beyond the research team.

Data storage followed secure data handling principles in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR, 2016).³⁶ Survey data were stored securely in password-protected documents within the SENsational Tutors One Drive and accessed only by the research team. Panel recordings were stored securely in the One Drive and will be deleted following the completion of the research.

Sensitive content was a consideration throughout both data collection and analysis. Panel discussions touched on topics including school-based trauma, mental health difficulties, suicide, and significant family distress. The panel provided a safe space for participants to share as much or little as they wished. Where participants disclosed experiences of serious harm, these were handled with care in both the facilitation of the discussion and the subsequent reporting of findings. In the Participant Information Sheet, participants were warned of the potential risk of the discussion exploring sensitive and distressing topics, and told they could refuse to answer any questions or stop speaking on any subject at any point. Within the sheet, resources for neuro-inclusive emotional support were provided, such as a link to the National Autistic Society Parent to Parent Emotional Support Service.

Researcher positionality is addressed in Section 2.6. The lead researcher's lived experience of autism, ADHD, and school trauma is acknowledged as a strength. However, reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analytic process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data. It is essential to disclose that the researcher also participated in the second panel, and is also recorded within the report as participant, "Beth". This was partially to support the panel facilitator to manage the second panel, and also as the lead researcher is an eligible participant, being an affected party of the 2026 Schools White Paper, as a SEND advocate and former student. In addition to participant-generated data, this study includes excerpts from my own contributions during the panel discussion, which are analysed in the

³⁶ European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2016). [*Regulation \(EU\) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data \(United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation\)*](#).

same thematic framework as those of other participants. Following principles of reflexive and autoethnographic inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011), these contributions are treated as situated accounts generated within the same research context, and are incorporated into the dataset to support a more comprehensive analysis of shared and divergent perspectives.³⁷ Furthermore, participating in the panel enabled the researcher to provide an embedded experience, with their experience of the panel guiding their research and analysis.

However, this also provided risk for unexamined bias and a potential conflict between the two roles. For example, there was the risk that I might overuse comments or quotes from myself or other participants who aligned with me. I sought to resolve this issue through reflexivity, ensuring that I paid closer attention to codes that I had no experience of or that did not align with my lived experience, and ensuring that I gave them equal weight, such as teacher workload. The second researcher who did not attend either panel and was external to the project, also reviewed the analysis to further reduce the risk of bias.

Use of AI - When typing up the report, the researcher used Claude.AI to speed up the writing process to comply with the tight consultation deadline. However, the researcher carefully checked any generated content to ensure it was accurate and aligned with the report. In line with the Participant Information Sheet, no raw data was inputted into any AI tools.

³⁷ Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). [Autoethnography: An overview. Historical Social Research](#), 36(4), 273–290.

3. Results: Quantitative Findings

This section presents the quantitative findings from the panel registration survey, completed by 157 participants across both panels. Results are organised by survey question and presented in two parts: descriptive statistics, which provide an overview of the sample profile and the distribution of responses across all variables, followed by inferential analyses, which examine whether responses differed significantly across participant sub-groups.

All descriptive statistics are reported prior to inferential testing. Where 'Prefer not to say' or 'Not Applicable' responses were recorded, these have been excluded from statistical calculations and are reported as frequency counts only. Effect sizes and significance levels are reported alongside all inferential results, with a threshold of $p < .05$ applied throughout.

Question 1: How would you describe your main role in relation to the Schools White Paper?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Carer	3	1.9
Local authority	6	3.8
Other	19	12.1
Parent	76	48.4
SEND Advocate	16	10.2
Teacher	37	23.6

Question 2: What is your local authority?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No response	8	5.1
East	24	15.3
East Midlands	2	1.3
North	7	4.5
North East	6	3.8
North West	16	10.2
South East and London	69	43.9
South West	9	5.7
West Midlands	16	10.2

Question 3: What is your school type?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Alternative provision	30	19.1
Elective home-education	9	5.7
Mainstream	44	28.0
Not applicable	38	24.2
Prefer not to say	8	5.1
Specialist	28	17.8

Question 4: Child or school age range

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not applicable	5	3.2
Post-16	26	16.6

Primary school	61	38.9
Secondary school	65	41.4

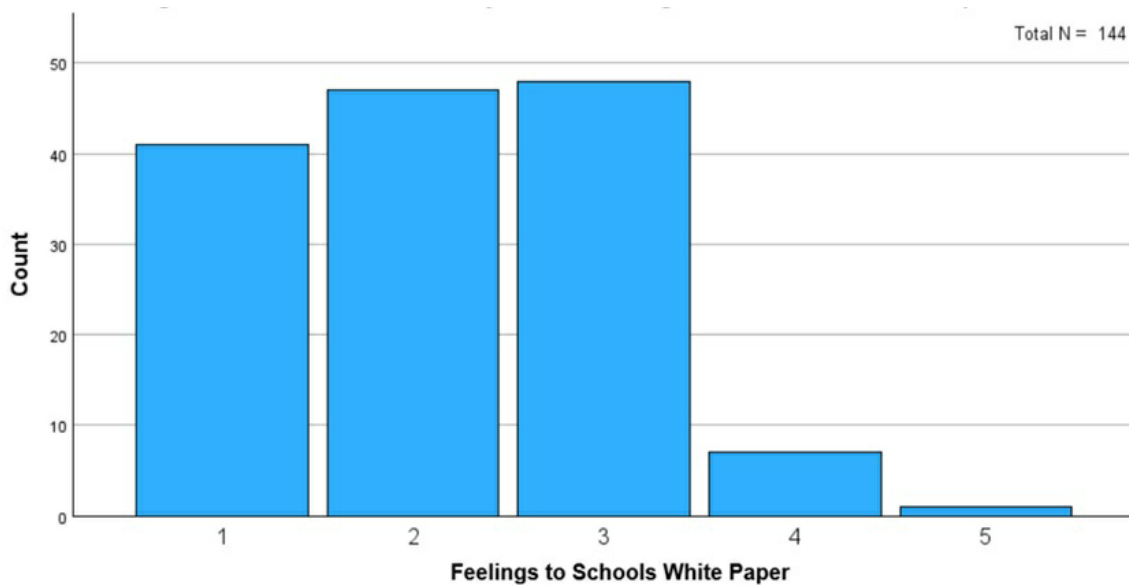
Question 5: Is your child a recipient of an EOTAS package?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	69	43.9
Not applicable	55	35.0
Prefer not to say	3	1.9
Yes	30	19.1

Question 6: What is your overall feeling towards the Schools White Paper? With 1 representing “Very negative” and 5 representing “Very positive”

Figure 1:

A histogram to illustrate the frequency of responses to Question 6



Median: 2

Mode: 3

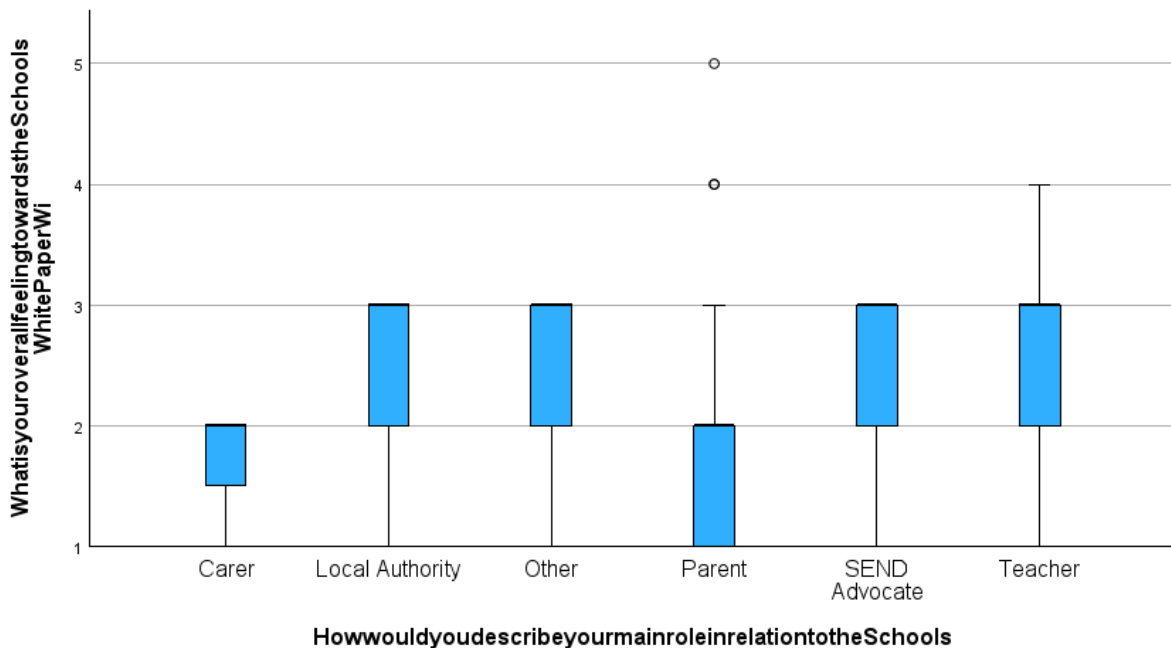
Mean: 2.17

Standard deviation: 0.92

Interquartile range: 2

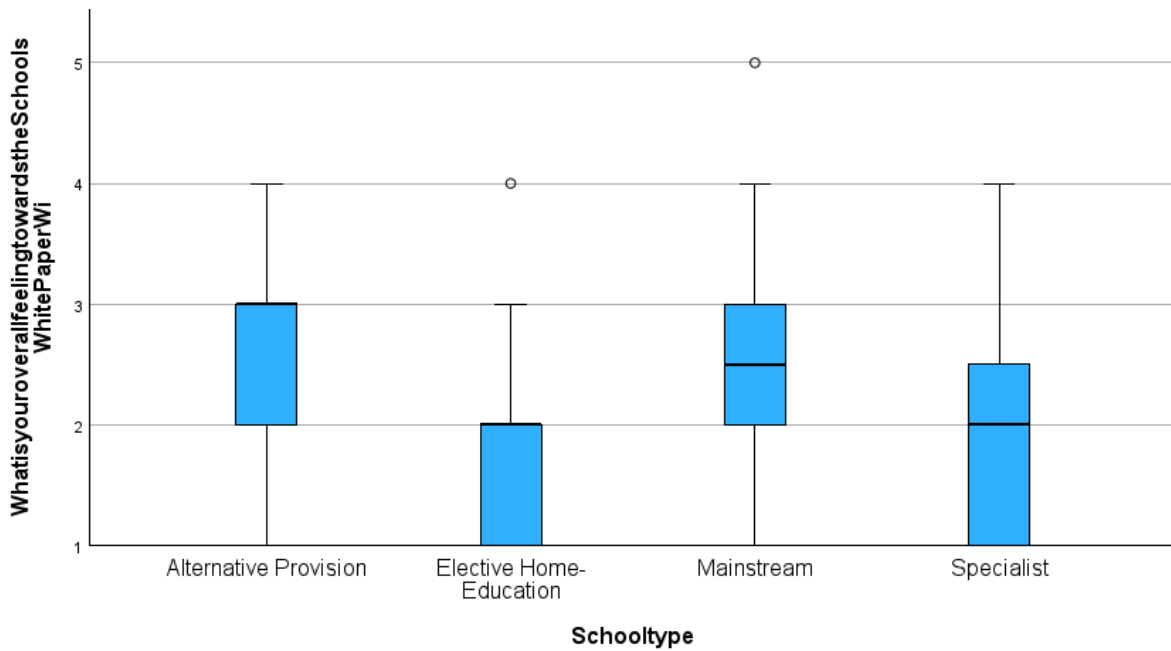
- **Do feelings about the White Paper differ by main role?**

There is a significant difference in ratings of overall feelings to the Schools White Paper according to main role ($N = 144$, $H(5) = 24.94$, $p < .001$). The eta-squared effect size indicated the effect size was medium (0.13). Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests. The only significant comparisons was parents compared to teachers ($z = -4.43$, $p < .001$), with parents ($N = 69$, median = 2, $SD = 1$) rating significantly lower than teachers ($N = 33$, median = 3, $IQR = 1$). The effect size is medium to large ($r = 0.44$).



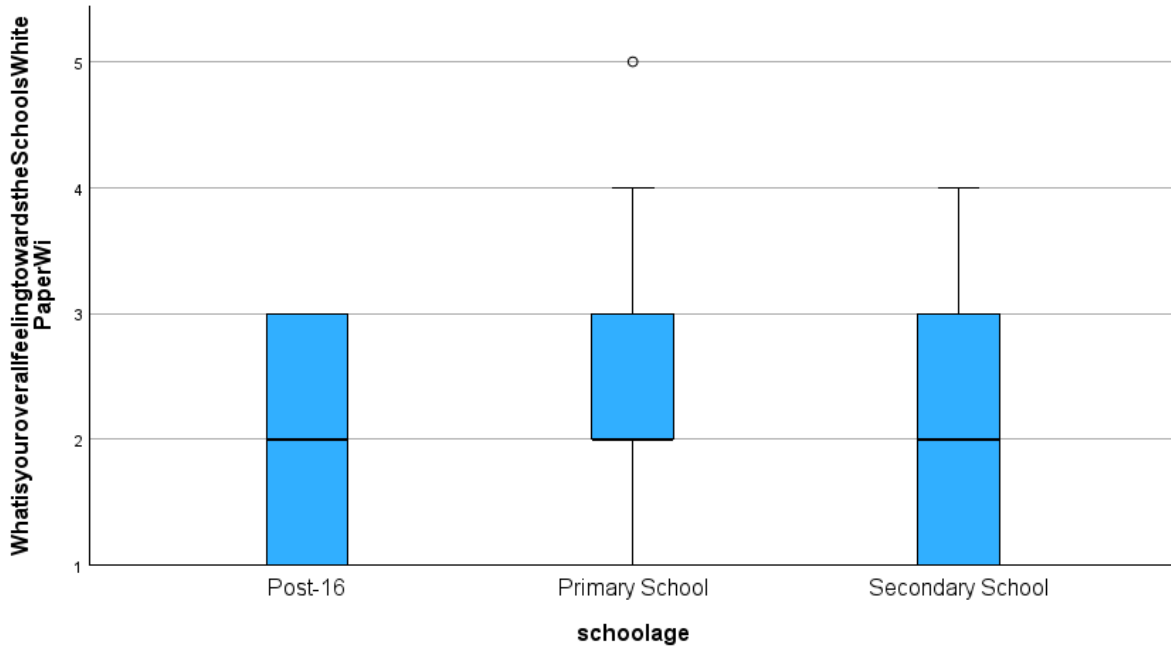
- **Do feelings about the White Paper differ by school type?**

There is no significant difference in ratings of overall feelings to the Schools White Paper according to school type ($N = 102$, $H(3) = 7.96$, $p = .047$).



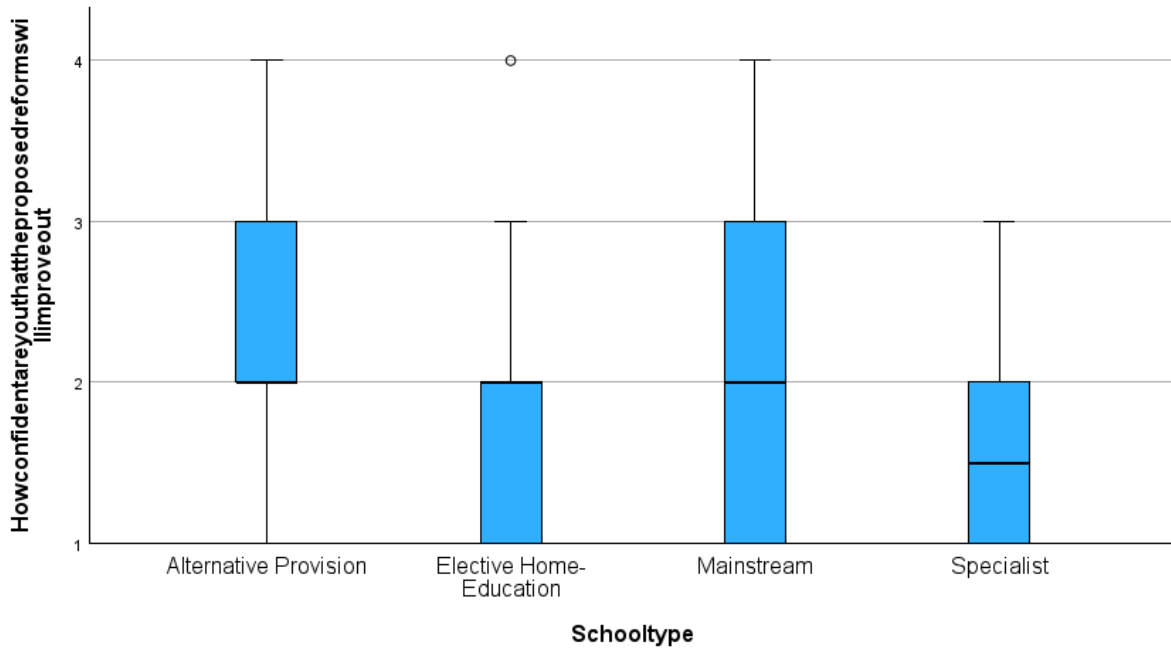
- **Do feelings about the White Paper differ by child/school age range?**

There is no significant difference in ratings of overall feelings to the Schools White Paper according to school age ($N = 139$, $H(2) = 2.93$, $p = .232$).



- ***Do feelings about the White Paper differ between children in receipt of an EOTAS package and those who are not?***

There is a significant difference in ratings of overall feelings to the Schools White Paper according to whether their child is a recipient of an EOTAS package ($N = 93$, $U = 578.0$, $p = .001$). Those who responded yes ($N = 30$, median = 1, IQR = 1) gave lower ratings than those who responded no ($N = 63$, median = 2, IQR = 2). The effect size is medium ($r = .33$).



Question 7: How confident are you that the proposed reforms will improve outcomes for SEND children? With 1 representing “Not at all confident” and 5 representing “Very confident”

Median: 2

Mode: 1

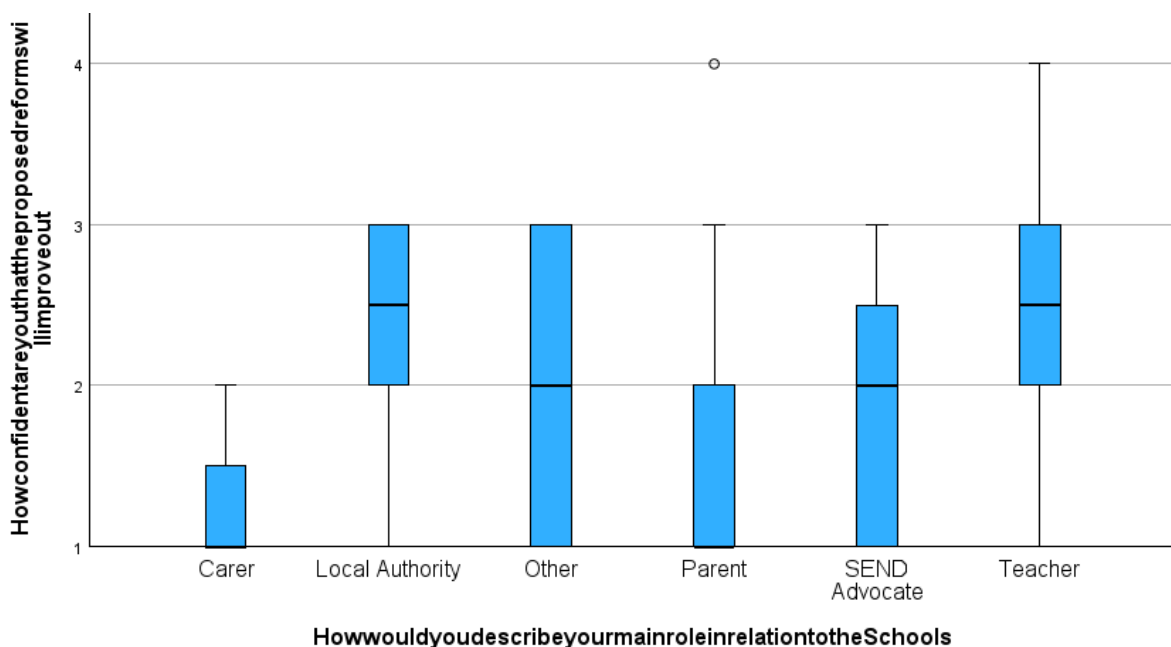
Mean: 1.93

Standard deviation: 0.87

IQR: 2

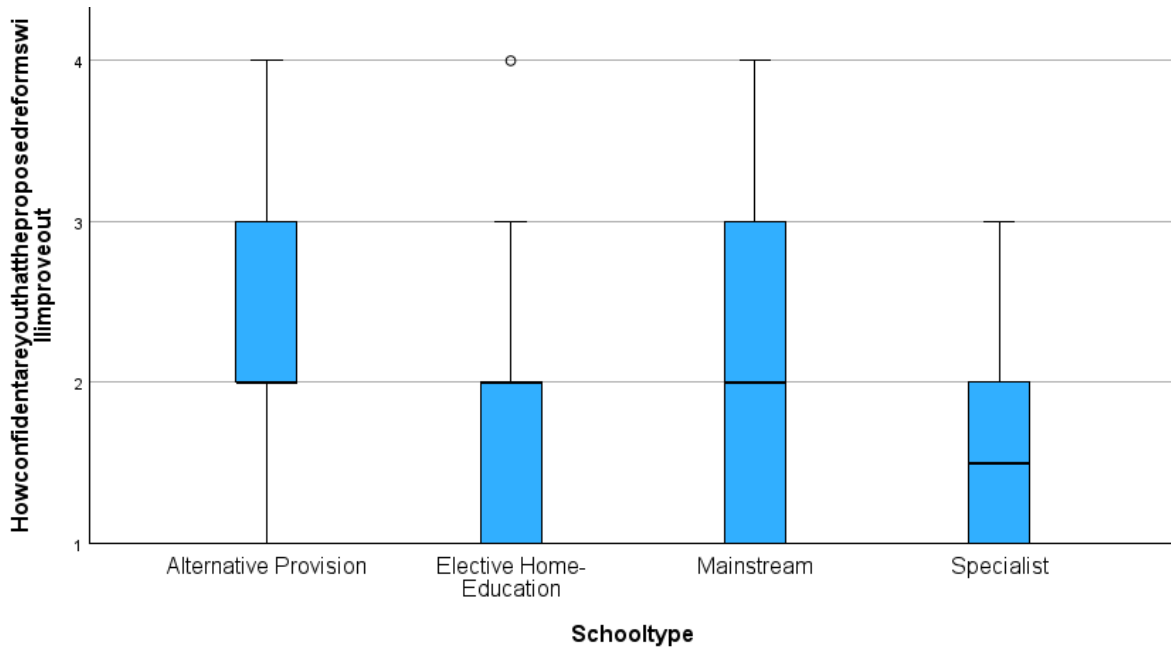
a) Does confidence differ by main role?

There is a significant difference in confidence about the Schools White Paper according to the main role of the respondent ($N = 151$, $H(5) = 20.16$, $p = .001$). The eta squared suggests a medium effect size (.11). All possible pairwise comparisons were conducted, but once Bonferroni corrected, only the comparison between parents and teachers was significant ($z = -4.02$, $p < .001$), with parents ($N = 73$, median = 1, IQR = 1) having lower scores than teachers ($N = 36$, median = 2.5, IQR = 1). This effect size is medium ($r = -.39$).



Does confidence differ by school type?

There is a significant difference in confidence according to school type ($N = 107$, $H(3) = 7.89$, $p = .048$). The eta squared suggests a small effect size (.05). All possible pairwise comparisons were conducted, but once Bonferroni corrected, only the comparison between specialist and alternative provisions was significant ($z = 2.80$, $p = .031$), with specialist ($N = 28$, median = 1.5, IQR = 1) having lower scores than alternative provision ($N = 29$, median = 2, IQR = 1). This effect size is medium ($r = .37$).



Question 8: To what extent do you feel confident that the Schools White Paper and its proposed reforms reflect an accurate understanding of SEND needs? With 1 representing “Not at all confident” and 5 representing “Very confident”

Median: 2

Mode: 1

Mean: 1.81

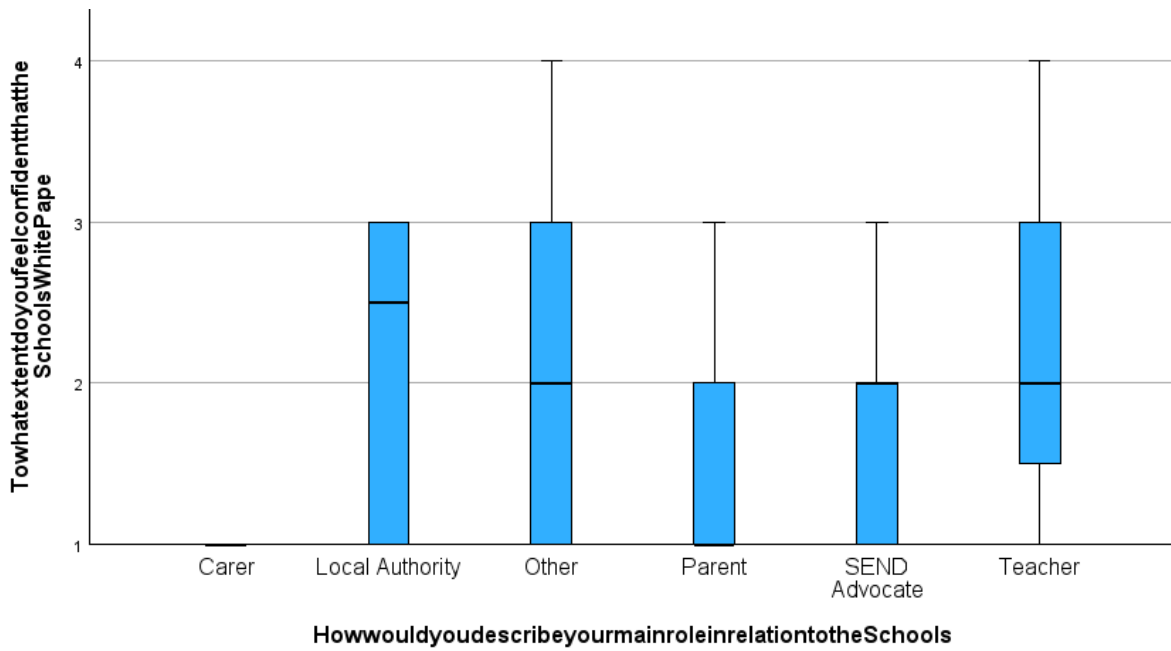
Standard deviation: 0.85

IQR: 1

- **Does this differ according to main role?**

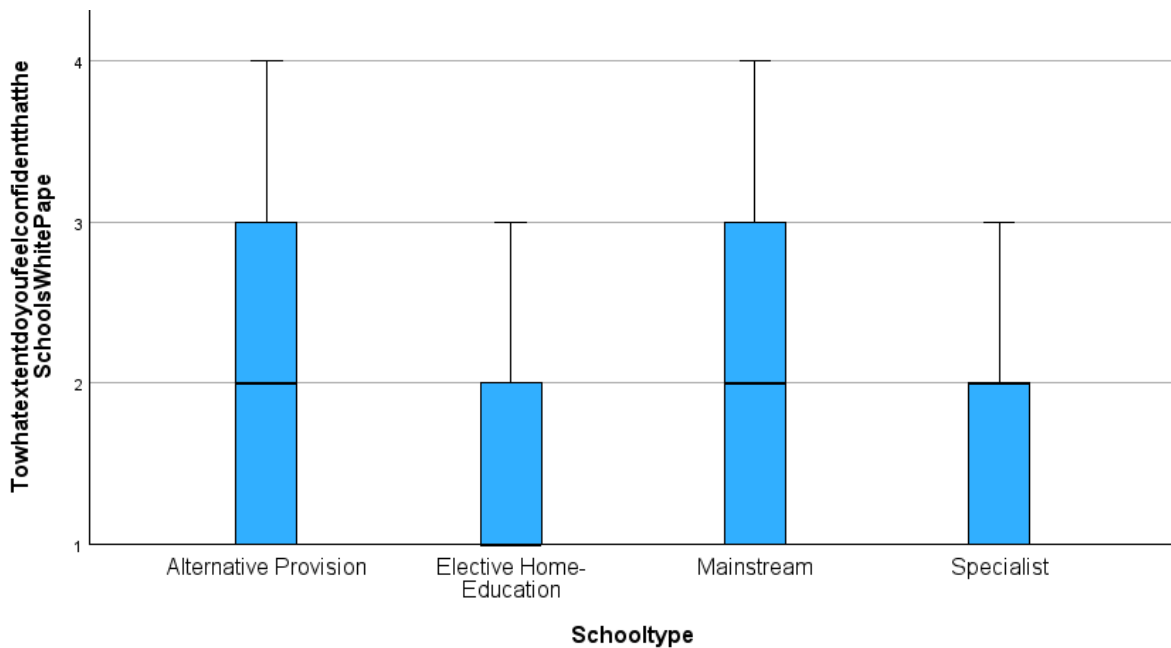
There is a significant difference in scores on this question according to main role (N = 150, $H(5) = 21.18$, $p < .001$). The eta squared suggests a medium effect size (.11). All possible pairwise comparisons were conducted, but once Bonferroni corrected, only the comparison between parents and teachers was significant ($z = -3.79$, $p < .001$), with

parents ($N = 72$, median = 1, IQR = 1) having lower scores than teachers ($N = 36$, median = 2, IQR = 2). This effect size is medium ($r = -.36$).



- **Does this differ according to school type?**

There is no significant difference in scores on this question according to main role ($N = 106$, $H(3) = 4.37$, $p = .224$).



Question 9: To what extent do you feel confident that the proposed reforms can be practically implemented? With 1 representing “Not at all confident” and 5 representing “Very confident”

Median: 2

Mode: 1

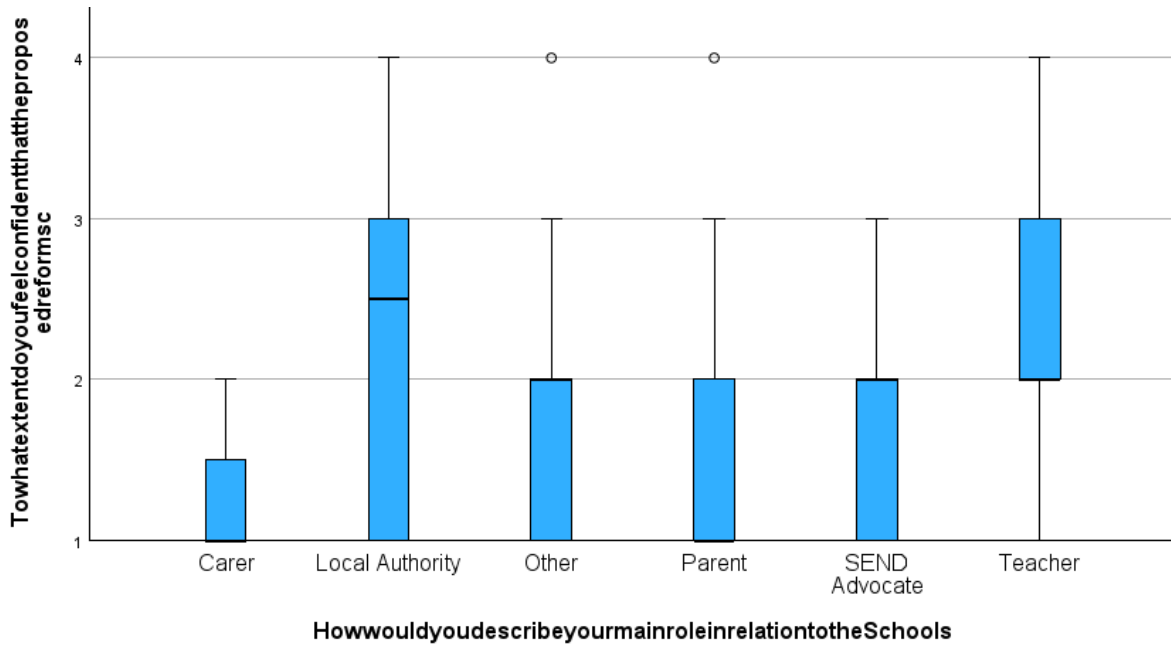
Mean: 1.76

Standard deviation: 0.84

IQR: 1

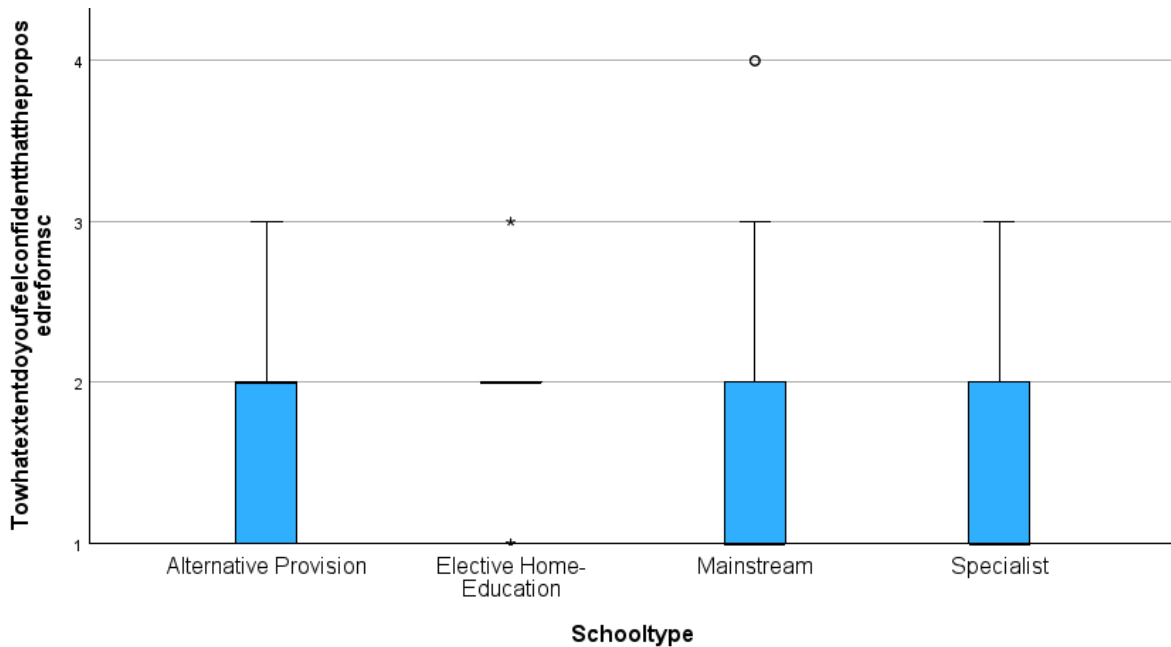
a) *Does this differ according to main role?*

There is a significant difference in scores on this question according to main role ($N = 153$, $H(5) = 20.45$, $p = .001$). The eta squared suggests a medium effect size (.11). All possible pairwise comparisons were conducted, but once Bonferroni corrected, only the comparison between parents and teachers was significant ($z = -4.22$, $p < .001$), with parents ($N = 75$, median = 1, IQR = 1) having lower scores than teachers ($N = 36$, median = 2, IQR = 1). This effect size is medium to large ($r = -.40$).



b) Does this differ according to school type?

There is no significant difference in scores on this question according to main role (N = 108, $H(3) = 2.74$, $p = .434$).



Question 10: Do you feel concerned about the Schools White Paper's focus on mainstream school?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	8	5.1
Not sure	32	20.4
Yes	111	70.7
Prefer not to say	6	3.8

Question 11: Do you feel concerned about the lack of information about EOTAS in the Schools White Paper?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	2	1.3
Not sure	33	21.0
Yes	113	72.0
Prefer not to say	9	5.7

Question 12: Do you feel concerned about potential restrictions on elective home education?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
No	12	7.6
Not sure	32	20.4
Yes	103	65.6
Prefer not to say	10	6.4

Question 13: What is your level of anxiety about the potential impact of the proposed reforms? With 1 representing “Not at all anxious” and 5 representing “Very anxious”

Median: 3.5

Mode: 3

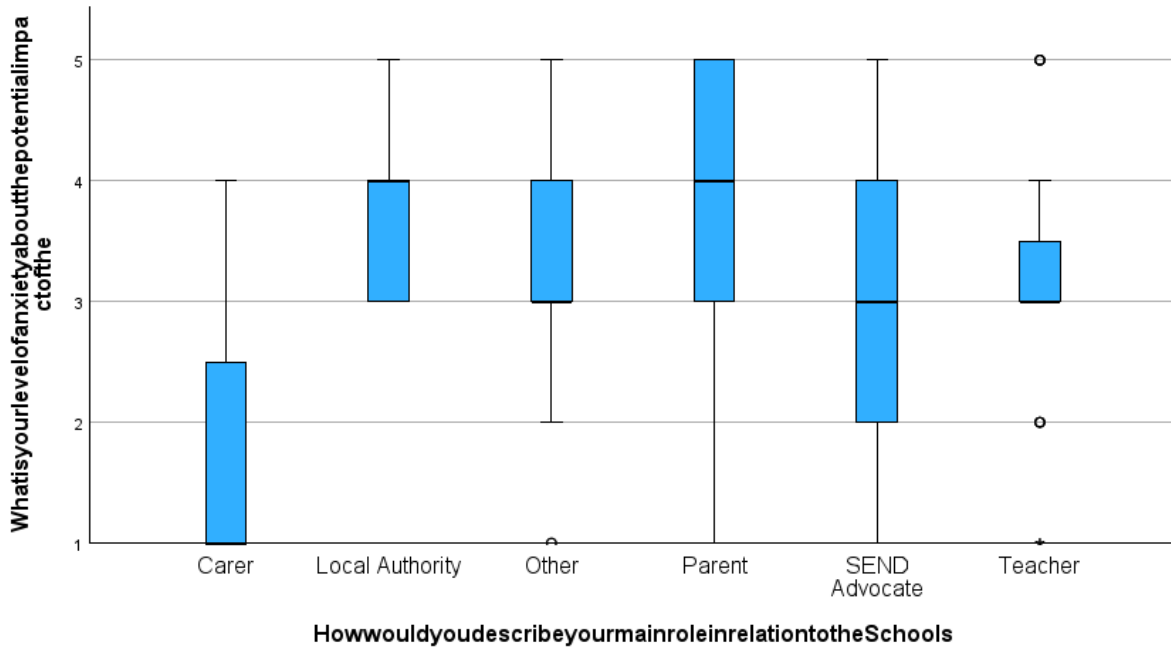
Mean: 3.53

Standard deviation: 1.24

IQR: 2

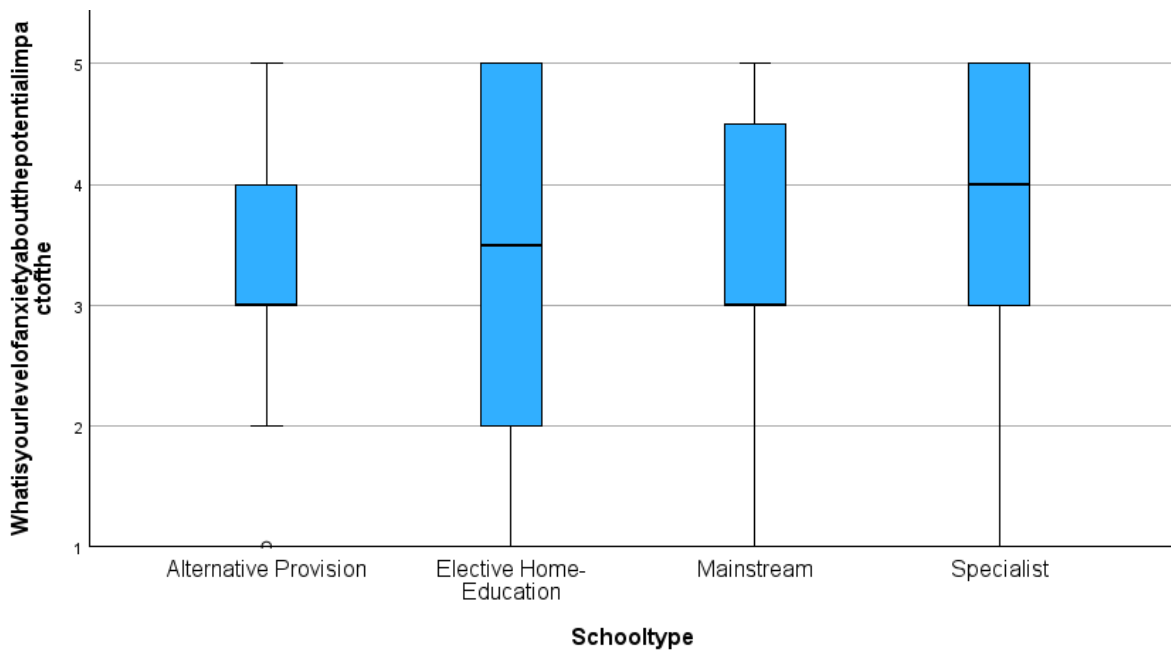
a) Does anxiety about the White Paper differ by main role?

There is a significant difference in anxiety about the Schools White Paper according to main role ($N = 142$, $H(5) = 20.64$, $p < .001$). The eta-squared effect size indicated the effect size was medium (0.12). Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests. The only significant comparisons was parents compared to teachers ($z = 3.56$, $p = .006$), with parents ($N = 69$, median = 4, $SD = 2$) rating significantly higher than teachers ($N = 36$, median = 3, $IQR = 1$). The effect size is medium ($r = .35$).



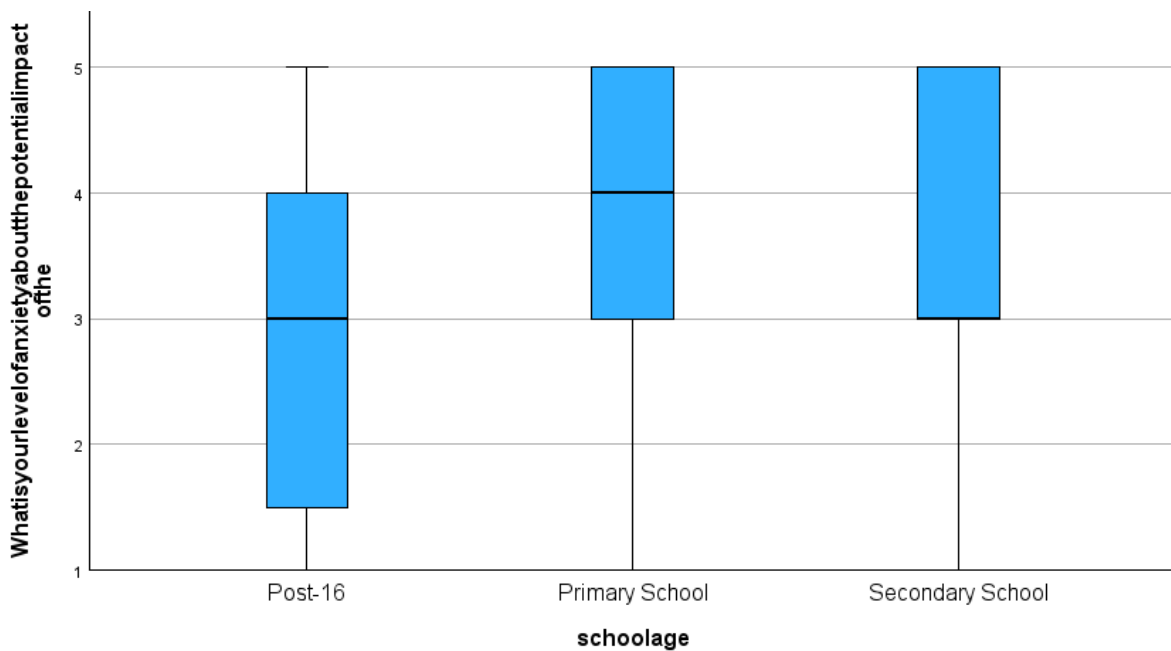
b) How does anxiety about the White Paper differ according to school type?

There is no significant difference in anxiety about the Schools White Paper according to school type ($N = 99, H(3) = 2.03, p = .566$).



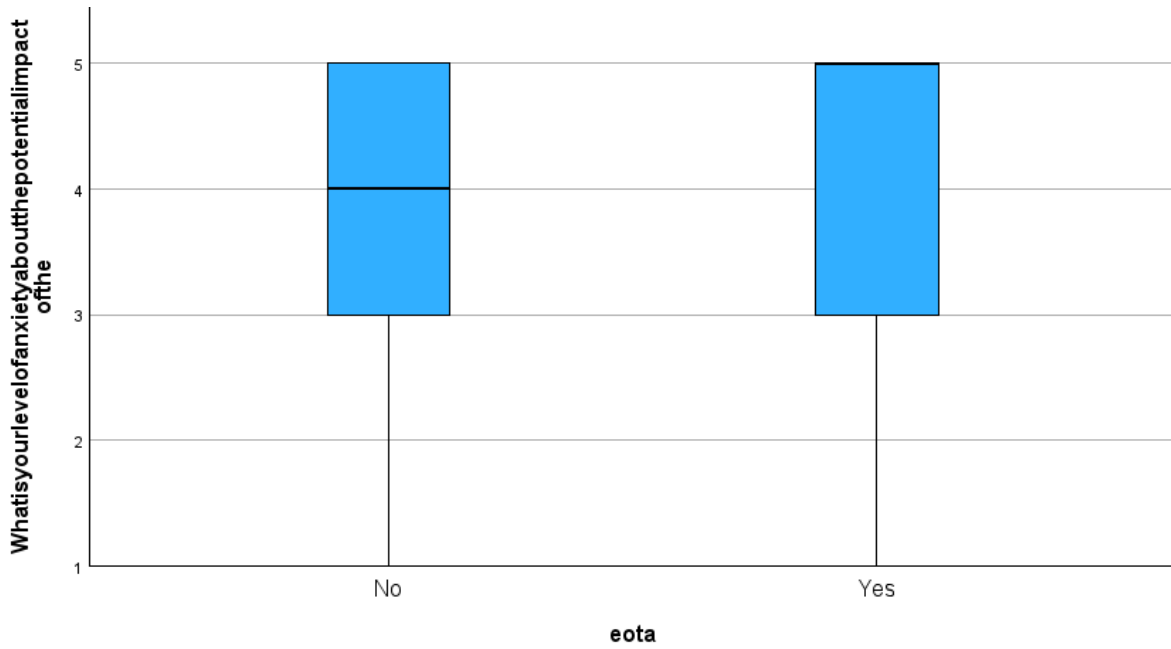
c) How does anxiety about the White Paper differ according to school age?

There is a significant difference in anxiety about the Schools White Paper according to school age ($N = 137$, $H(2) = 6.27$, $p = .043$). The eta-squared effect size indicated the effect size was small (0.03). Pairwise comparisons were conducted using Dunn-Bonferroni post hoc tests. The only significant comparison was post-16 versus primary school ($z = -2.50$, $p = .037$), with post-16 ($N = 23$, median = 3, $SD = 3$) rating significantly lower than primary ($N = 54$, median = 4, $IQR = 2$). The effect size is medium ($r = -.29$).



- d) Does anxiety differ between children in receipt of an EOTAS package and those who are not?

There is no significant difference in anxiety according to whether their child is a recipient of an EOTAS package ($N = 91$, $U = 1071.0$, $p = .091$).



Question 14: What is your top priority concern surrounding the Schools White Paper and its proposed reforms?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Children’s mental wellbeing	63	40.1
School’s funding	23	14.6
Choice of learning environments	20	12.7
Other	15	9.6
EOTAS	13	8.3
Inclusion	12	7.6
Teacher workload	5	3.2
Prefer not to say	5	3.2
Financial impact on families	1	0.6

4. Results: Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Three themes were identified, each addressing a distinct dimension of participants' responses to the proposed reforms. The themes are presented below with their constituent sub-themes. All participant quotations are presented in italics, and instances of repetition that affected the clarity of quotes were removed.

Theme 1: 'A Recipe for Disaster' - Practical Issues with the Reforms

Skepticism about the practical implementation of the proposed reforms was a consistent response across both panels, particularly in relation to recruitment and workload for educators, funding and timeframe issues, and the standardised approach to SEND needs.

Sub-theme 1.1 - An Unworkable Burden on the Workforce

Participants, including both educators and parents, identified the education workforce as bearing a large practical risk from the proposed reforms, due to their already limited capacity.

SENCOs and teachers were described as already operating beyond sustainable capacity, with the reforms set to intensify that pressure. Participants raised concerns that educator's roles would become increasingly bureaucratic, pulling practitioners away from child-centred work towards burdensome administrative processes (Carla, Wendy). One respondent (Wendy, SENCO) captured this directly:

And of course it's going to fall on the SENCO. I know it'll fall on SENCOs' heads because everything does. [...] I am so frustrated by the fact that my skillset lies with working with children, going in, spotting what their needs are, being able to advise people on the best strategies to use with them, and put that in place, and make sure their needs are met, and do all of those things. And yet the SENCO role is no longer that. It's filling in paperwork, it's sitting in meetings, it's, it's a whole load of bureaucracy, and all I can see from a lot of the white paper is more bureaucracy.

The mental health of SENCOs and teachers featured prominently across both panels. Educators with a strong interest in SEND provision were described as being at the highest risk of burnout under the weight of additional expectations:

[...] my real concern is your individuals in the field who like myself had a passion for doing it are just going to get so overwhelmed by everything.

(Wendy, SENCO)

Another argued this was a direct threat to the quality of provision children would receive:

But also as well as the teachers, the demand on the admin that the teachers will be doing will water down what they deliver to the children.

(Carla, AP Tutor)

Participants also raised concern that the reforms assumed a level of SEND knowledge among classroom teachers that does not currently exist and cannot be built in the timeframe proposed, with one (Carla, AP Tutor) noting that:

The teacher's being expected to plan personalised support to track progress in meaningful ways. And all of this is being lumped onto the teacher without adequate training in SEND. I don't know how the government think they're going to suddenly do it, you know, a couple of inset days and woohoo, all of a sudden you're a SEND specialist. It doesn't work like that.

Teachers were framed as being set up to fail, with potentially damaging outcomes for students.

Participants also raised that the increased workload could create issues at a relational level. Relationships between schools and parents were characterised as already fragile, with reforms potentially adding further strain due to the reduction of EHCPs. This could mean that parents have no recourse to challenge decisions about their child's provision outside of the school's complaints process, potentially creating a higher risk of a relational breakdown between families and schools:

And if we take away those legal rights, it's going to become parents versus schools. And that's going to be really difficult and it's going to break down that relationship as well.

(Jennifer, Local Authority)

Concerns were also raised that conflict between parents and schools could potentially affect the children still in school:

And I think as a parent, a lot of the time the one person that you genuinely have on your side is school and that relationship, if it's burnt to that extent, then it can be, you know, that you have that confirmation bias, and are you going to be able to put your trust into somebody at school? And, you know, that you may have as a parent, you may have other siblings there, like how is that going to affect the situation also?

(Laura, Parent)

Taken together, the evidence in this sub-theme suggests that participants across various roles view the proposed reforms as impractical and potentially harmful to an already overworked workforce.

Sub-theme 1.2 - Inadequate Funding, Timeframe, and Definition

This sub-theme addresses participants' concerns regarding the infrastructure of the proposed reforms. Participants across both panels expressed serious concern about whether the time and financial investment allocated were sufficient to carry reforms of this scale.

Implementation Issues

The funding committed to the reforms was acknowledged by some participants but consistently described as inadequate for the ambition the White Paper sets out.

And even when you look at the investment that the government is proposing, which on paper looks great, the numbers are huge. When you break that down to individual

schools, it's nothing and it is not going to be enough for schools to skill up their staff to the extent that is needed to be able to carry through these reforms.

(Suzie, Parent)

And is there, the amount of money that's being pledged towards the system, I just, I can't really see it making that work.

(Chris, Advocate/Legal)

For participants, the funding appeared good “on paper,” but did not realistically cover the proposals.

Another core concern was timing. Participants questioned whether meaningful training could be implemented within the proposed two-year timeframe, especially given the workforce pressures documented in Sub-theme 1.1:

[...] I mean, we worked, we counted backwards the other day, didn't we have like, so right, the 2029, we're now in 2026. Let's be honest, this is going to, it's a consultation. It's going to be a proposal, then it's got to go to consultation. [...] Let's be realistic. The back end of 2026, then we've got two years.

(Laura, Parent)

Not only the qualification. I mean, that's a piece of paper. You don't have the underlying experience.

(Rachel, AP Provider)

Two years. Yeah. So it's how, [...] how's this time scale going to get met?

(Laura, Parent)

The question of who will be responsible for implementing the reforms at school level, and how they will be recruited, trained, and supported, also surfaced as an unresolved practical problem:

But the way that this is now looking, I have concerns about how, I think Rachel and I, we said about it, like how are we, how are they going to recruit? Do people want to do this? Where does it stop? How many SLTS, OTS, EPS are there going to be in a school? Are they looking after a region? Is it going to be like an LA? Will you have, I live in [Region], so it's like, we're going to, are schools going to be allocated, you know, a set amount of SLTs and OTs, is it per region? Is it going to be like the case officer equivalent that you have with an LA? And I think that's the bit that we really need defining, because if you've just got three or four OTs that are then responsible for the equivalent of a local authority, that then I can see is a recipe for disaster.

(Laura, Parent)

Confusion and Lack of Clarity

Participants across both panels also expressed confusion regarding what the reforms would mean in practice. The Experts at Hand model, the role of independent panels, and the processes involved in moving between ISPs and EHCPs were all described as poorly defined, generating uncertainty among professionals and parents alike (Chris, Advocate/Legal, Steven, LA; Tracey, Tutor; Belinda, Parent).

Whilst participants acknowledged that lack of clarity can occur with reforms, this confusion was framed as “chaos” (Laura, Parent). Some participants felt that ambiguity in the proposed reforms created additional emotional burden:

There's always a settling in period. This is like absolute chaos. It's going to add even more time, more stress, more emotional turmoil for the children and for the parents, because people aren't going to know what to do.

(Participant 83532, Laura, Parent)

This sub-theme suggests that participants are unconvinced that the reforms can be practically implemented and are distressed by the lack of clarity.

Sub-theme 1.3 - Standardisation versus Individuality

The third dimension of participants' practical critique concerns the conceptual framework that underpins the reforms. Several participants argued that the reforms impose a standardised model on SEND children, and that this is unhelpful and potentially harmful to these young people.

Putting Children into Boxes

SEND encompasses an enormous range of needs and presentations. Participants described the reforms as instead fitting children into predetermined categories for set provisions that do not reflect genuine need:

[...] I think what's concerning is whichever way you look at it, it does seem to be shoehorning children into predetermined sets of packages, as opposed to actually taking them based on their individual needs, which I think is a real concern.

(Tim, Legal)

Participants raised the potential harms that could be caused by uniform “packaged” support that does not address individual needs. Participants repeatedly used the language of “putting children into boxes” when describing this:

It's more paper filling, it's more ticking boxes and trying to make children fit boxes. And they don't fit boxes. They're very, um, individual. We're all individuals, but those children are individuals and we've got to recognise that.

(Wendy, SENCO)

This concern also applied to potential changes to EOTAS and AP provision, and how this could impact their efficacy:

And I worry that they are going to be forced to go into frameworks that they really don't fit in, because we cannot just fit everyone into, you know, boxes. The whole point of EOTAS

is that it's not a package, it's not a box. It's, it's individual and the whole point of AP is that it's alternative and it's not part of a, you know, a streamlined framework system. So, I think that we, if they are forced to turn into, you know, just another part of a standardised system, then we'll just see the same problems happening again at, at AP.

(Lorraine, AP Provider)

For many participants, the flexibility and autonomy within SEND education is non-negotiable, as it is a key factor in engaging SEND children with their education.

Ignoring the 'Invisible Cohort'

Lorraine (AP Provider) argued that the children most at risk from a standardised framework are the “invisible cohort”, those whose needs do not fit neatly into the provided categories. They were described as children with severe mental health needs alongside neurodivergence, who are unable to attend school. She expressed concern that the reforms would deepen their invisibility within the education system.

In particular, the lack of definitional clarity around the term 'complex' in relation to SEND needs was highlighted as a concern (Rachel, AP Provider; Laura, Parent). This was due to fears it may not apply to the “invisible cohort”, despite their struggles within mainstream education. As one respondent put it:

It's not clear from the white paper how that will work and at what point a child's needs become complex, which, you know, is not a definition that has any kind of legal basis, but is actually going to be a really important point. What is a complex SEND presentation? And that's really not clear.

(Lorraine, AP Provider)

This reflects concerns that the Schools White Papers' planned layers of support may lead to some children slipping through the net.

Theme 2: 'Lost Lifelines' - Losing Legal Protections and Education

That Works

Despite the Schools White Paper's claims about a focus on children's needs, participants reported feeling that the reforms would remove vital lifelines for children and their families. This theme explores the mismatch between the reforms and children's needs across two connected areas of loss: the removal of legal protections, and the forced return to mainstream settings.

Sub-theme 2.1 - Loss of Legal Enforceability

The replacement of EHCPs with ISPs was a consistently raised concern across both panels. Participants were particularly concerned that EHCPs are legally enforceable, whilst the new ISPs are not. Participants described EHCPs and SEND tribunals as last resorts (Belinda, Ellie). The tribunal system, in particular, was identified as the key point of appeal when a family disagrees with a local authority about which school or provision is appropriate for their child. With the focus shifting to the school's complaints process, concerns were raised about the impact on families, particularly from those with lived experience of the tribunal process:

Now, because I took matters into my own hands and I went for the EHCP and through the tribunal and everything and got him the support that he's got today, my main concern is that now parents don't have anywhere to go other than the schools that's implementing all of this.

(Pauline, Parent)

Other participants praised the government for not getting rid of the tribunals altogether, but urged them to reconsider the "neutering" of EHCPs for children with ISPs:

I think the government needs to course correct on that. You know, I applaud the government for not listening to probably local government agitators that are suggesting that they get rid of the SEND Tribunal. So well done, Bridget Phillipson, for not getting rid

of the SEND Tribunal. Thank you. But now let's go one further and say let's preserve our right, because it's really the key appeal point as to what school the child's going to go to.

(Chris, Advocate/Legal)

One parent questioned the sequencing of changes to the SEND tribunals, as the current proposals will remove legal protections before the reforms have even been shown to work:

So, it's this removal of legal rights before we know whether or not this is actually going to deliver. It should be the other way around. If it delivers, we don't need our legal rights.

(Belinda, Parent)

This sub-theme suggests that participants, particularly parents, were distressed by the potential removal or weakening of legal rights, and its impact on their families.

Sub-theme 2.2 - Threats to EOTAS and AP, and Forced Return to Harmful Settings

Several participants described EOTAS, elective home education, and independent specialist provision as a lifeline that helps SEND children to survive authentically through their school years. For example:

[...] I see alternative provision, homeschooling, EOTAS, I see that as like, it's almost like to me, like an incubator for SEND children. It's something that, we would not survive or certainly thrive in the normal education circumstances. So, we need that, especially through, I find the teenage years were especially difficult for me. And through that period of time, homeschooling provided this really safe space for me to be able to be myself and to grow into myself and to live, you know, as I want to.

(Beth, Advocate and Former SEN Student)

Independent specialist schools were also described as providing life-saving support that the maintained sector cannot replicate for some children:

And a lot of these independent special schools are an absolute lifeline for loads of children who don't fall into the category that is typically catered to by the maintained special sector.

(Chris, Advocate/Legal)

EOTAS was similarly described as having a transformative impact for children who have been unable to learn comfortably in any institutional setting, with participants noting that it offers a fundamentally different relationship between the child and learning itself:

And we had to hire solicitors and then really fight the local authority to try to secure EOTAS. [...] We finally won it.

And it took, it's taken almost two years for our little boy to be able to do one-to-one with any of the team. But it's now really successful and working amazing. We couldn't imagine any other way. And I think for us, hearing about the white paper is really concerning because exactly like you said, you know, if they take things away and they expect him to go back to a school environment. He couldn't do that. You know, we've had a failed mainstream, we've had a failed specialist school, and he's finally thriving.

(Ellie, Parent)

Concern about the removal or restriction of non-school AP and EOTAS was expressed across both panels. Parents described fear that the provisions currently keeping their children safe would be withdrawn under the new framework, either through explicit policy change or through the removal of legal mechanisms (Belinda, Moira). Furthermore, the conditionality of these provisions was itself identified as a structural problem. Participants described the enormous emotional, financial, and practical cost of securing EOTAS (Ellie), and then the subsequent persistent anxiety that it could be removed at any moment. Several participants described a pattern in which improvement in a child's outcomes under EOTAS or alternative provision is used as justification for withdrawing it, returning the child to the harmful settings:

We finally got EOTAS two years ago. Worked absolutely great. My son was isolated. He wouldn't come out of his bedroom for a very, very long time. We had Sensational Tutors that came out, fantastic tutor, our Mary Poppins, and she managed to get my son out of isolation. [...] We had so many plans for the future because he was finally engaging in education after 11 years of not being able to access education because of his additional

needs. The local authorities seen how well he was doing and completely snatched the EOTAS off him and put him into a school for children with behaviour issues and SEMH, small little bit of ASD, where he was tackled to the ground daily, called the police because he felt like he was in danger, and learnt how to vape. He has now not been in education for over a year, back into isolation, back into not wanting to learn because he has just been so traumatised by schools, by the local authorities not listening, and now the local authorities have agreed, yes, EOTAS is better for my son. So now we are going to panel with a new EOTAS plan a year and a half later..

(Moir, Parent)

Within the proposed reforms, the treatment of alternative provision as a temporary bridge back to mainstream rather than a legitimate long-term educational setting drew particular concern:

[...] you know, one question that we were asked was how temporary should AP be? And of course, my answer is it should not be temporary.

(Lorraine, AP Provider)

Some participants argued that this framing fundamentally misunderstands SEND educational needs. For some children, mainstream school is a setting that has caused lasting damage and to which return is not appropriate:

But the issue that you have with APs, the route that we seem to have gone down is we send them to an AP to prove that they do really well in a, in a provision and then we chuck them back at mainstream. It goes tits up, they're re-traumatised, and then you have the second part of the battle on your hand, because you then are, like, well, we knew it wasn't going to work, so, sorry.

(Laura, Parent)

The practical barriers to return were also raised, including the concern that attending school, including via transport, is genuinely unmanageable for some SEND children and families

(Pauline, Parent). This sub-theme suggests that, for some children, non-school educational alternatives are viewed as life-saving, long-term solutions.

Theme 3: The Trauma of Mainstream

Participants across both panels described mainstream education as a site of active harm for SEND children and their families, pushing some neurodivergent young people into crisis.

Sub-theme 3.1 - School as a Site of Harm

Several participants described mainstream school as an environment that causes harm:

Schools have completely traumatised and destroyed my son. So I don't understand how the government can "save" children in mainstream schools as well as SEN schools.

(Moir, Parent)

Several participants drew attention to the specific mechanisms through which mainstream school causes harm to neurodivergent children, including the use of behaviour policies and exclusions against children whose behaviour is a direct expression of their SEND needs, and the use of autism diagnoses against young people within school processes (Michael, SEN Student; Pauline, Parent). The perception that schools close ranks and use institutional policies as protection from accountability was raised by multiple participants, including a young person:

Obviously, from what happened to me, obviously trying to cover their backs in school policies that, that is what they do. Obviously, I have autism myself. They did use that as their key points and I did not like that. [...] I did get out of that school. You know, it was a very, very challenging time. You know, from my personal experience, I have been in special school to a normal mainstream school, and now at a college. [...] The school system, to be honest with you, in my eyes, is very corrupt, whether you're at a special school, a normal mainstream school.

(Michael, SEN Student)

Participants raised the issue of suicide among neurodivergent young people in direct connection with the experience of mainstream schooling and the threat of returning to it:

So I think it will be very dangerous if we don't allow some kind of options and autonomy for those young people, because, you know, we've just spoken a lot about mental health and you know, at [Charity], we are supporting families whose children have died by suicide. So, it's, a journalist asked me a couple of weeks ago, what's the worst that could happen? Well, the worst that could happen is more children die, and it's, it feels dramatic to say something like that. But that is our reality. We're already dealing with that reality right now.

(Lorraine, AP Provider)

Furthermore, one previously home-schooled participant questioned the narrative that SEND children outside of mainstream school naturally have poorer outcomes:

And again, there's often this fear mongering around, you know, children must be in school, you know. [...] Or they won't get a good education, they won't make friends. You know, I mean, I have a first-class honours degree, I have a master's degree with distinction, I have a good job, I have friends, I have a life. And I think this, and I'm not saying that there aren't benefits to being in mainstream education, but I do find it frustrating with this narrative that it's the best place for all children, in all circumstances. For many autistic and ADHD and neurodivergent, SEND children, it isn't the best place. It is a damaging place.

(Beth, Advocate and Former SEN Student)

The reforms' emphasis on return to mainstream and inclusion within standard school settings raised concerns for many participants. Several described reintegration into mainstream after a period of alternative provision as retraumatisation:

[...] I did try and go back to school when I was 13 because it was presented to me as the, you know, the gold standard of education, the best option for me. And I lasted, I think, about a month to two months. I couldn't cope with it. And it had a, it had a deep seated,

you know, it had a huge impact on my, on my mental health. I couldn't do, it actually got to the point where I couldn't do studying, proper studying for about a year afterwards. I had to just have a complete break because my parents, well, my mum homeschooled me, so I just had a complete break for that period of time.

(Beth, Advocate and Former SEN Student)

For many participants, mainstream education is not neutral, but instead represents a site of trauma and retraumatisation.

Sub-theme 3.2 - Wellbeing over Academic Outcomes

Several participants also questioned the School White Paper's use of academic outcomes alone as a measure of student success. The participants argued that, for SEND children, these metrics are insufficient and potentially misleading, as these are not the only indicators of whether provision is successful. Participants also highlighted that they viewed child mental health as more important than academic achievement (Ellie, Belinda, Rachel, Laura), which is also reflected in the 40% of respondents who ranked child wellbeing as their top concern within the survey.

Mental health, safety, trust, and wellbeing were described by participants as metrics of equal importance:

There is talk in the white paper about, you know, improving outcomes, but the focus is on academic achievement and that's what's going to be measured. So the measure of how successful these, this white paper and you know, if it goes all the way through, what comes in the new SEN system, its measure of success is going to be about academic achievement, which means children like my daughter will be totally disregarded, because her academic achievement will not be measured in GCSEs or A levels or B levels or T levels or anything else, but the failure to deliver the provision she needs will be life changing.

(Belinda, Parent)

And why are we not celebrating an improvement in well-being and confidence and all of those amazing, you know, amazing things that we, that are probably more important than, you know, that GCSE?

(Rachel, AP Provider)

For SEND children who may have additional challenges, including mental health, several participants argued that other metrics were required. They also highlighted the potential long-term impacts on adult social care, highlighting the importance of these as success metrics within alternative education.

There are so many other types of outcomes for an SEN child. For example, how much money do they cost adult social care? How much do they need to use CAMHS? [...] Do they attempt, you know, on their lives or do they do serious harm? Which is a serious problem. How many end up in prison? SEN to prison pipeline. [...] You know, why is the NAO [National Audit Office] not judging the value of EHCPs based on how many of those extremely expensive things towards society they managed to avoid?

(Chris, Advocate/Legal)

Another participant (Laura, Parent) also challenged the conformity embedded in mainstream educational culture, including the requirement to sit still, wear uniforms, and to adopt standard curriculums, as another contributing factor to the harm SEND children experience:

[...] like something so simple for SEN children is the removal of wearing a uniform, is something so simple which would really accommodate so many SEND children, of even just getting onto a playground if they are in mainstream, and they, you know, this sitting down this, this conformity, this like quite archaic way of education, the way it's been delivered. That is what needs the overhaul, I feel.

(Laura, Parent)

Furthermore, Beth (Advocate and Former SEN Student) highlighted potential discrepancies in the neurotypical understanding of SEND educational needs and challenges:

[...] But I think the problem is a lot of neurotypical people do not understand it. They don't understand why a school would be traumatising to children. I think, you know, if you say you've got trauma from school, I think people would look at you like, well, it's just school. It can be upsetting sometimes, but you just get on with it. It's on a whole other level for autistic and SEND young people because we have a completely different set of experiences.

(Beth, Advocate and Former SEN Student)

This sub-theme suggests there is a fundamental misalignment between what the reforms are designed to achieve and what SEND children need, reflecting the low median confidence score in relation to the white paper's understanding of SEND needs (documented in Section 3).

Sub-theme 3.3 - Emotional Costs on Families and Educators

Children were not the only group found to be impacted by mainstream education. Parent and carer participants described the emotional and financial costs of fighting for their child's EOTAS:

[...] but it took four years of fighting, three, four tribunals later, £70,000 for us later to even secure our son and what he's got now.

(Ellie, Parent)

They also described being ignored or invalidated when fighting for their children's education, which they felt wasted their time and compounded their confusion and distress needlessly:

I feel like SEND parents are getting punished for this big deficit [...] I had to go through tribunal. I waited 11 months for the tribunal and they had an appointed solicitor, a locum solicitor for the LA. So just think of the cost of that. For them to turn around a week before the court date to change their mind, without even telling me, that they do agree that my child needs a specialist school.

(Pauline, Parent)

We've had numerous times where the local authority have gone against our independent reports, sent Ed-Psychs to our home to try and counter our reports. And every single one of them has honestly said to us, you know, we can't argue against your reports [...]

(Ellie, Parent)

As explored in Theme 2, participants also raised that this emotional burden on families could be worsened by removing the legal tools that currently give them a meaningful outlet to challenge decisions.

Everybody walks away. And your only recourse is the law.

(Belinda, Parent)

One participant further highlighted the lack of acknowledgement towards the struggles of SEN families in the report:

And then furthermore, I don't really see much talking about sort of sympathy for what it's like for SEN parents and SEN children going through the system. It's like, okay, you guys are superheroes. You're going through incredibly intolerable situations. Parents of SEN children who actually really are pulling out every stop, quitting careers, cutting their hours down. Frankly, unfortunately, their relationships are suffering, their health is suffering, they're putting everything for their children on the line. A little bit of acknowledgement of that would be nice, because we're seeing acknowledgement of, oh, we understand that we're costing lots of money for local authorities and that's not a great thing. Well, what about what it's doing to these SEN children and parents?

(Chris, Advocate/Legal)

Participants also described similar emotional costs among educators due to pressures, which they feel the reforms will worsen:

[...] I'm somebody who had a nervous breakdown in the role because of the pressures that were put on me. I think that we will have even more of that. I have a massive concern about it. I'm worried about the SENCOs that are within my network.

(Wendy, SENCO)

This sub-theme potentially provides some insights into the high anxiety scores, particularly of parent respondents, in the survey detailed within Section 3 of this report. Parents and educators described experiencing emotional and financial challenges in fighting for EOTAS, feeling unheard and unacknowledged, and breaking down under high workloads - issues that they describe as likely to worsen due to the reforms.

5. Discussion

The findings of this report present a consistent, troubling picture of how the SEND education community, including parents, carers, teachers, local authority representatives, SEND advocates, students and legal representatives, feels about the proposed reforms. Across both the quantitative and qualitative strands of the research, the same core concerns emerge: poor alignment with SEN needs, unworkable implementation, and increased anxiety for families and educators alike.

Quantitative and qualitative findings in dialogue

The qualitative data adds human context to the quantitative data captured in Section 3. The survey data showed alarmingly low reported rates of confidence and high levels of anxiety. Across all groups surveyed, overall feeling towards the white paper, and responses to all three confidence questions (outcomes for SEND children, understanding of SEND needs, practical implementation), was negative (median = 2 for all four questions). Furthermore, survey respondents reported high levels of concern about several key issues. 70.7% report feeling concerned about the white paper's focus on mainstream school. 72% reported concern about the lack of information on EOTAS, and 65.6% reported concern about potential restrictions on elective home education. 40.1% of respondents also ranked "Children's mental wellbeing" as the top priority concern surrounding the reforms. There were also a number of statistically significant contrasts on several questions. On all scale questions (overall feelings about the report, three confidence measures, and anxiety), parents scored lower than teachers, reporting lower confidence and higher anxiety. This likely reflects differing perspectives derived from the demands of the teaching role and the difference in their relationship to SEND young people. However, both groups reported largely negative scores, with median scores only differing by 1 to 1.5 points, suggesting the negative perception of the reforms is largely unanimous. Further research is needed to understand the differences between teacher and parent perspectives of

the reforms. On the confidence question, “How confident are you that the proposed reforms will improve outcomes for SEND children?”, there was also a significant difference in confidence between school type, with specialist school representatives (median = 1.5) scoring lower than alternative provision (median = 2). Finally, in terms of anxiety about the white paper, there was also a significant difference in anxiety according to school age, with post-16 respondents (e.g., parents or educators of post-16 students) reporting lower anxiety than primary education respondents. One possible explanation is the long-term timeline for the reforms, as the full reform implementation is planned from the 28/29 academic year onwards. Therefore, parents with young SEN children in primary schools may be more likely to be affected by the reforms. However, this would not explain the increased concern among primary school teachers and other groups. The difference between specialist schools and alternative provision is also unclear. Further research is required to explore these concerns.

The qualitative findings facilitate a deeper understanding of the reasons for the negative feelings outlined by the questionnaire results. In line with the low confidence rating for SEN outcomes, many participants spoke of their concern regarding the potential negative impact of the return to mainstream education, and the need to shift emphasis from academic to wellbeing outcomes. Concerns about the systemic lack of understanding around SEND needs was explored in sub-theme 1.3, as participants highlighted how one-size-fits-all solutions are often unsuitable for SEND children, questioning whether the proposed standardised tiers of support will be fit for purpose. Theme 1 more broadly explored many other concerns surrounding the practical implementation of the reforms, including the impact on teacher workloads, and the impracticality of the proposed funding and timeframe. Furthermore, concerns around the focus on mainstream and the potential impact on non-school settings was highlighted in Theme 3, The Trauma of Mainstream, as participants explored the harm they and their families had experienced through mainstream settings. Parents such as Pauline, Belinda, and Moira, described their lived experiences of fighting for their children’s educational rights at enormous financial and emotional cost, and seeing their children’s progress undermined when provision was withdrawn. They also expressed fear at the removal and reduction of these legal protections for some SEND families.

Furthermore, SEND students described their own experiences of distress and harm within mainstream education, and the emotional and educational impacts on their lives. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that concern about the reforms is consistent across groups, and highlight the importance of mental health in future decisions made regarding the reforms.

Situating the findings in the broader research context

The three themes presented in this report develop and challenge existing understanding of SEND education in ways that carry direct policy relevance.

Theme 1 adds to the existing literature on workforce pressures in SEND education by providing evidence of how educational professionals frame the proposed reforms as structurally unsustainable within an already stretched education system. Previous research has documented SENCO burnout and workload as systemic problems (Pearson et al., 2015), whilst teachers are denied the practical resources and training they require (Lin et al., 2025).³⁸³⁹ Lived experience accounts from professionals, such as Wendy, highlight that for the education workforce, the proposed reforms feel poorly considered in light of current workloads. In terms of SEND needs, Fisher et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of ensuring that those involved in SEND education understand neurodiversity and provide flexible, needs-centred approaches.⁴⁰ This strongly aligns with participant's accounts of the harm caused by unmet and misunderstood SEND needs, such as through behaviour policies and forced return to mainstream (Beth, Michael, Moira), and concerns about standardisation putting children into "boxes" (Tim, Wendy,

³⁸ Pearson, S., Mitchell, R. and Rapti, M. (2015). ['I will be "fighting" even more for pupils with SEN': SENCOs' role predictions in the changing English policy context.](#) *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 15(1), 48–56.

³⁹ Lin, F., Webster, R., & Tadić, V. (2026). ['Did I do things right?' Teachers' experiences of the policy–practice gap in SEND provision in secondary schools in England.](#) *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 1-19.

⁴⁰ Fisher, E., MacLennan, K., Mullally, S., Rodgers, J., & Tzemou, E. (2025). ['I Can't Go to School, It Isn't a Won't': Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Children's School Anxiety Within the UK's Systemic Crisis.](#) *Neurodiversity*, 3.

Lorraine). This is arguably especially important for the 'invisible cohort', children whose needs are real but fall below any formal threshold. There is limited literature on this group, but the term is in use within the SEND community, often interchangeably with the term "Sanctuary Cohort".⁴¹ They are identified as a particularly vulnerable group within SEND education, as they may not be recognised as "complex" but have school-related trauma and are argued to require an individualised approach.⁴² As Cook (2024) argues, the heterogeneity of neurodivergence can mean that a child's needs are often not recognised even in diagnostic assessments or EHCPs, so standardised provision packages are unlikely to reflect the needs of this under-recognised group.⁴³ Further research on this group is needed to understand their profiles and needs within education.

Theme 2 provides direct primary evidence of how the replacement of EHCPs with ISPs is understood by those who have used legal mechanisms to secure provision. The accounts of participants such as Pauline, Belinda, and Chris, who describe the tribunal process as one of the key mechanisms that produce results for SEND children, highlight the potential harm these changes could cause. This aligns with Pluquailec et al. (2025), where participants similarly characterised SEND Tribunals as a key legal lifeline that is essential due to "local authority non-compliance."⁴⁴ Saxton et al. (2025) also highlighted how, for parents, systemic failures and accountability issues were a core barrier to SEND education for their children, whilst legal protections were a lifeline.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the finding that improvement in a child's outcomes under EOTAS is systematically used as a trigger for withdrawal of that provision, articulated by Moira, represents a harmful structural dynamic that requires further exploration in the literature.

⁴¹ Save Our Children's Rights. (2026). [The Invisible Lifeline: Why EOTAS is non-negotiable for the 'Sanctuary Cohort' Part 1](#). Special Needs Jungle.

⁴² Save Our Children's Rights. (2026). [The Invisible Lifeline: Why EOTAS is non-negotiable for the 'Sanctuary Cohort' Part 1](#). Special Needs Jungle.

⁴³ Cook, C. (2024). [Conceptualisations of neurodiversity and barriers to inclusive pedagogy in schools: A perspective article](#). Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs, 24(2).

⁴⁴ Pluquailec, J., O'Connor, G., & Sadler, E. (2025). [Parental experiences of the UK special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\) review consultation](#). British Journal of Special Education, 52(4), 576-584.

⁴⁵ Saxton, J., Burn, A.-M., Zhang, X., Toulmin, H., Parker, J., Casey, H., Matthews, J., Winterburn, I., Tripp, C., Barnes, S., Hall, P., Black-Hawkins, K., Gains, H., Ford, T., & The HOPE Study. (2025). [Barriers, enablers and outcomes reported by parents engaged with the special educational needs system in England: A qualitative study](#). PLoS One, 20(11), e0335606.

So, to conclude, these findings are consistent with wider literature identifying systemic failures as a key barrier to SEND education and source of emotional harm, and legal protections as an essential mechanism for redress.

Theme 3 highlights the relationship between mainstream schooling, trauma, and the proposed reforms. The existing literature on school-based distress in neurodivergent children, including Connolly et al. (2023), Siggers and Day (2024), and Fisher et al. (2025), documents the prevalence and severity of distress.⁴⁶⁴⁷⁴⁸ What this report adds is the explicit connection, made by participants including Beth and Lorraine, between that established evidence base and the specific policy direction of the White Paper: that an emphasis on mainstream inclusion as the primary aspiration is not a neutral or progressive goal for this population, but a direct return to the environment that caused harm. This is further supported by Michael's account of his autism being used against him within school processes, and Lorraine's account of working directly with families whose children have died by suicide due to their interaction with the school system. Beth's account of her traumatic experience of mainstream education, positive experience of EHE and subsequent academic success also directly challenges the assumption that mainstream school provides the highest standard of education. Participants's experiences of being misunderstood or blamed for behaviours associated with their SEND needs within the mainstream school system potentially aligns with the finding in Fisher et al. (2025) that "neuro-normativity" may be central to negative experiences in school.⁴⁹ This highlights the importance of continuing to develop a meaningful understanding of the SEND community within education and beyond.

⁴⁶ Connolly, C., Constable, H., & Mullally, S. L. (2023). [School distress and the school attendance crisis: A story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need](#). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14, 1237052.

⁴⁷ Siggers, G., & Day, B. (2024). [Beyond School Avoidance: Recognising, Identifying, and Addressing Autistic Burnout in Children](#). *BJPsych Open*, 10(S1), S169-S169.

⁴⁸ Fisher, E., MacLennan, K., Mullally, S., Rodgers, J., & Tzemou, E. (2025). ['I Can't Go to School, It Isn't a Won't': Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Children's School Anxiety Within the UK's Systemic Crisis](#). *Neurodiversity*, 3.

⁴⁹ Fisher, E., MacLennan, K., Mullally, S., Rodgers, J., & Tzemou, E. (2025). ['I Can't Go to School, It Isn't a Won't': Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Children's School Anxiety Within the UK's Systemic Crisis](#). *Neurodiversity*, 3.

The three themes provide opportunities for further research and policy amendments based in several key areas: the issues of teacher workload, the “invisible cohort”, the impact of EOTAS and its removal from SEND children, and the trauma associated with mainstream education for SEND children.

Strengths & Limitations

Across both quantitative and qualitative data, this report highlighted diverse perspectives on the SEND reforms, including from parents, teachers, SENCOs, APs, local authorities, SEND advocates, and students.

The first researcher’s lived experience of autism, ADHD, and school trauma also provided additional strengths to the research, creating rapport with participants and enabling analysis from a lived experience perspective, in-line with calls for more autistic researchers in autism research.⁵⁰⁵¹ The researcher made efforts to ensure diverse perspectives were recorded and explored, reflexive notes were maintained throughout, and the analytic process followed Byrne's (2022) framework for rigour in reflexive thematic analysis.⁵²

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

The survey samples were largely self-selected. Participants chose to attend a panel about the Schools White Paper, which means that those with strong existing views, particularly negative ones, were more likely to participate than those who are neutral or broadly supportive of the

⁵⁰ Chown, N., Robinson, J., Beardon, L., Downing, J., Hughes, L., Leatherland, J., Fox, K., Hickman, L., & MacGregor, D. (2017). [Improving research about us, with us: a draft framework for inclusive autism research](#). *Disability & Society*, 32(5), 720–734.

⁵¹ Gowen, E., Taylor, R., Bleazard, T., Greenstein, A., Baimbridge, P., & Poole, D. (2019). [Guidelines for conducting research studies with the autism community](#). *Autism Policy & Practice*, 2(1 A new beginning), 29–45.

⁵² Byrne, D. (2022). [A worked example of Braun and Clarke’s approach to reflexive thematic analysis](#). *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391–1412.

reforms. The quantitative findings should therefore be understood as representative of engaged and affected stakeholders within the SEND community population. It should also be acknowledged that several of the panel participants were selected by the panel moderator and first researcher to provide specific expertise and encourage recruitment to the panel. Whilst the panelists selected had diverse experiences and views of the reforms, this may have meant that the panels were less reflective of the target population. However, this was necessary to increase sign up to the survey and panels, and to ensure diverse perspectives were heard within the panels.

The recruitment methods, including social media posts, community networks, and direct invitation, further shaped the sample. While these methods were appropriate for reaching the target population, they may have overrepresented those with existing connections to SEND advocacy communities and organisations. The relatively small number of local authority participants, and higher number of parent/carer respondents, limits the generalisability of group comparison findings. Group comparisons were slightly underpowered, due to limited numbers in some groups. For example, there were only 6 Local Authority survey respondents. Therefore, results are exploratory at this stage. However, it does suggest there are some differences in scores between parents and teachers, which should be explored further. Further research is required to replicate and confirm the findings.

Implications for policy

The Schools White Paper is underpinned by five stated principles: Early, Local, Fair, Effective, and Shared. The findings of this report suggest a substantial gap between those principles and the proposed reforms as experienced by the SEND community.

Early

Early intervention is a principle this community broadly supports, but participants argued that the reforms do not invest adequately in the workforce, the training, or the infrastructure that early intervention requires.

Local

For parent and carer participants, local accountability is a principle undermined by the removal of the legal mechanisms that currently hold local authorities to account for the decisions they make about children's provision.

Fair

Fair provision is another principle challenged by the qualitative data. Participants describe a system in which they have had to fight for their children's education, and in which the reforms, by replacing legally enforceable EHCPs with non-enforceable ISPs, reduce rather than restore it.

Effective

Effective provision, participants argued, cannot be achieved through standardised packages applied to a population with such diverse needs and presentations. Therefore, the Schools white paper's proposals for standardised, tiered levels of support, rather than individual, tailored options, could be problematic.

Shared

Shared responsibility, the principle that schools, families, and professionals will work together, requires the relational trust that participants described as already fragile and potentially destroyed by the removal of legal protections.

The findings carry a forward-looking implication. Several participants made the economic argument, articulated most directly by Chris, that under-investment in SEND provision now generates far larger costs in adult social care, the justice system, and mental health services

later on. Aside from the moral arguments, this highlights the fiscal issues potentially caused by the proposed reforms, particularly as the National Audit Office's own framework for evaluating SEND provision does not currently capture these outcomes.⁵³ A reformed evaluation framework that includes these longer-term social outcomes could produce a more accurate picture of the value of specialist provision.

⁵³ [Support for children and young people with special educational needs](#) - National Audit Office

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to the Department for Education and are drawn directly from the evidence presented in this report. They are offered in the spirit of the consultation process, as substantive, community-led contributions to a policy debate that respondents feel has not yet adequately reflected their experience and needs.

Recommendation 1: Preserve and strengthen legal enforceability of SEND provision

Addressed to: Department for Education, Parliament

The replacement of EHCPs with ISPs removes legal enforceability from the primary mechanism by which SEND children's provision is guaranteed. The DfE should ensure that all children currently in receipt of an EHCP retain that legal protection, and that any new framework provides equivalent enforceability for students of all profiles and need levels.

This recommendation is directly evidenced by Sub-theme 2.1 of the qualitative analysis.

Recommendation 2: Protect EOTAS, elective home education, and alternative provision as legitimate long-term educational settings

Addressed to: Department for Education, Local Authorities

The White Paper frames alternative provision as a temporary bridge to mainstream reintegration. This report suggests that for a significant group of SEND children, AP and EOTAS should not be temporary, as they are the only settings in which those children are safe and able to learn. The DfE should explicitly recognise AP and EOTAS as legitimate long-term educational destinations, remove the emphasis on returning to mainstream from the legislative framework, and end the practice, described in Moira's account, of withdrawing provision when a child's outcomes improve.

This recommendation is evidenced by Sub-theme 2.2 of the qualitative analysis.

Recommendation 3: Address SENCO and teacher workload and training

Addressed to: Department for Education, School Trusts, Local Authorities

The reforms cannot be implemented by a workforce that is already at breaking point. The DfE should commission an independent assessment of current SENCO and teacher capacity before implementation proceeds and commit to a realistic training programme.

This recommendation is evidenced by Sub-theme 1.1 of the qualitative analysis.

Recommendation 4: Provide adequate funding and a realistic implementation timeframe

Addressed to: Department for Education

The funding committed to the reforms has been consistently described by participants as insufficient when broken down to school level. The two-year implementation timeframe has been described as unworkable for the scale of training, recruitment, and systemic change required. The DfE should publish a detailed implementation plan that includes: a school-level breakdown of funding allocation; a realistic multi-year training and recruitment programme; and clear operational definitions of key terms including 'complex' SEND needs and 'independent' panel membership.

This recommendation is evidenced by Sub-theme 1.2 of the qualitative analysis.

Recommendation 5: Abandon rigid categorical frameworks

Addressed to: Department for Education, Independent Expert Panel

The proposed Specialist Provision Packages impose predetermined support structures on a diverse population. The DfE should ensure that Support Plans are genuinely individual, developed from the child's specific needs, rather than a strict category. The 'invisible cohort' of children whose needs are often overlooked require explicit recognition and a clearly defined pathway in any new framework.

This recommendation is evidenced by Sub-theme 1.3 of the qualitative analysis.

Recommendation 6: Redefine success metrics to include mental health, wellbeing, and long-term social outcomes

Addressed to: Department for Education, National Audit Office, Ofsted

The White Paper's measurement framework centres on academic attainment. For SEND children, this framework is not fit for purpose. The DfE should work with the National Audit Office to develop a broader evaluation framework for SEND provision that includes mental health outcomes, wellbeing indicators, and long-term social care costs.

This recommendation is evidenced by Sub-theme 3.2 of the qualitative analysis.

Recommendation 7: Embed lived experience in policy design, implementation, and review

Addressed to: Department for Education, Independent Expert Panel, Local Authorities

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that SEND people and their families, the people with the deepest knowledge of SEND needs, often feel unheard in the processes that determine provision. The DfE should establish a standing SEND community advisory board, comprising parents, carers, young people with SEND, and SEND advocates. The consultation process for any future SEND reform should be co-designed with the community it affects, and the government should publish a transparent account of how community responses have shaped final policy decisions.

This recommendation is evidenced across all three themes of this report.

7. Conclusion

This report was produced to capture the views of those most directly affected by the 2026 Schools White Paper, including parents, carers, educators, AP providers, and SEND young people, and to ensure those views are represented in the public record.

As established in the introduction and literature review, the White Paper proposes a fundamental reshaping of SEND provision in England, with reforms that have attracted significant criticism in the press, particularly in relation to the legal enforceability of new provisions, the future of EOTAS, and the emphasis on mainstream inclusion. These concerns align with those broadly established within the research literature regarding SEND children's experiences of the education system, including school distress.

This report used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative reflexive thematic analysis across two community panels to establish both the scale and depth of perspectives toward the reform. Across both strands of the research, a consistent picture emerged. Quantitatively, confidence in the reforms was low across the entire sample.

Furthermore, 72% of respondents expressed concern about the lack of information regarding EOTAS. 40% identified children's mental wellbeing as their top priority concern. Whilst parents scored significantly lower than teachers across every measure, teachers also only reached the lower end of the scale, suggesting a consistently negative perception of the reforms across families and professionals.

The qualitative findings organised this concern into three themes. Theme 1 established that participants across all roles viewed the reforms as impractical, placing undeliverable demands on an already overstretched workforce, with unworkable funding and timeframes. Theme 2 established that participants perceived the reforms as oriented towards protecting institutional and financial interests rather than children's welfare, particularly through threats to legal protections and non-mainstream education. Theme 3 established that for many SEND children, mainstream education has been actively harmful, and that the reforms, by embedding

mainstream as the primary aspiration and measuring success through academic attainment alone, risk worsening this harm. Taken together, the three themes make clear that participants do not oppose reform in principle, but feel the current proposed reforms do not reflect SEND needs, and could cause real harm. As explored in the discussion, panel participants' reflections suggest the impact of the reforms will not align with the White Paper's five principles - Early, Local, Fair, Effective, and Shared.

This report puts forward seven recommendations to the Department for Education. These call for the legal enforceability of SEND provision to be preserved; for EOTAS, EHE, and alternative provision to be recognised as legitimate long-term settings rather than temporary bridges to mainstream; for urgent action on workforce capacity and training; for adequate funding and a realistic implementation timeline; for genuinely person-centred provision that rejects rigid categorisation; for a broadened definition of educational success that includes wellbeing outcomes alongside academic attainment; and for the meaningful embedding of lived experience in policy design and review.

At the time of writing, the government's consultation remains open. This report is submitted in the hope, and with the expectation, that the data, statistics and voices gathered here are taken seriously. As this report makes clear, the consequences of poorly planned, uninclusive reforms could be dire. For many SEND children and their families, this is a matter of child safety, wellbeing, and in the most serious cases, of suicide prevention. The SEND community has spoken. We urge the Department for Education to listen.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A — Survey Questions

1. How would you describe your main role in relation to the Schools White Paper?

Answer Options: Mainstream / Specialist / Alternative Provision / EHE

2. What is your local authority?

Answer Options: Text, to be converted into categories

3. What is your school type?

Answer Options: Mainstream / Specialist / Alternative Provision / EHE

4. Child or school age range

Answer Options: Primary / Secondary / Post-16

5. Is your child in receipt of an EOTAS package?

Answer Options: Yes / No

6. What is your overall feeling towards the Schools White Paper? With 1 representing “Very negative” and 5 representing “Very positive”

Answer Options: Ordinal (1–5)

7. How confident are you that the proposed reforms will improve outcomes for SEND children? With 1 representing “Not at all confident” and 5 representing “Very confident”

Answer Options: Ordinal (1–5)

8. To what extent do you feel confident that the Schools White Paper and its proposed reforms reflect an accurate understanding of SEND needs? With 1 representing “Not at all confident” and 5 representing “Very confident”

Answer Options: Ordinal (1–5)

9. To what extent do you feel confident that the proposed reforms can be practically implemented? With 1 representing “Not at all confident” and 5 representing “Very confident”

Answer Options: Ordinal (1–5)

10. Do you feel concerned about the Schools White Paper's focus on mainstream school?

Answer Options: Yes / No / Not sure

11. Do you feel concerned about the lack of information about EOTAS in the Schools White Paper?

Answer Options: Yes / No / Not sure

12. Do you feel concerned about potential restrictions on elective home education?

Answer Options: Yes / No / Not sure

13. What is your level of anxiety about the potential impact of the proposed reforms? With 1 representing “Not at all anxious” and 5 representing “Very anxious”

Answer Options: Ordinal (1–5)

14. What is your top priority concern surrounding the Schools White Paper and its proposed reforms?

Answer Options: Schools funding / Financial impact on families / Teacher workload / Children's mental wellbeing / Inclusion / Choice of learning environment / EOTAS / Other

15. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet, including the sections on data storage, pseudo-anonymisation, and the use of panel recordings, which can be found at the bottom of the panel webpage. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected. I agree to my survey answers and any panel participation being used in the final pseudo-anonymised report, and understand that I can request data removal up until Wednesday 15th April. (Please note that we cannot include you within the report without this consent.)

Answer Options: Checkbox only

16. I understand that full panel discussions will be recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only, and that any use of recorded footage for social media or YouTube will require my separate explicit consent at that time.

Answer Options: Checkbox only

Appendix B — Participant Information Sheet

The Participant Information Sheet is available to read here:

<https://www.sensationaltutors.co.uk/participant-information-sheet/>

Appendix C — Consent Questions

Consent was provided through the checkboxes displayed in Appendix A.

To review the original thematic codes and for any other questions, please contact: info@sensationaltutors.co.uk