

Improving inclusion in mainstream settings

Inclusion Reviews

December 2025



Essex Education Inclusion Strategy

Equity and excellence for all

The current position

The need for inclusive, high-quality education in Essex is greater than ever.

In 2022, our pupils' overall progress and attainment was too low. In addition, there have been stark increases in pupils' overall absence and persistent absence. The number of pupils being suspended or permanently excluded has risen significantly, as has the number of pupils being withdrawn from schools to be home educated. Concerns over safeguarding and pupils' social, emotional and mental health are rising, while the needs of pupils within our school communities are both increasing and becoming increasingly complex.¹

Underpinning these headlines are the continuing socio-economic effects of the pandemic, real term reductions in education funding (that often disproportionately impact the most inclusive schools²), increasing recruitment challenges, staffing shortages, and consequent rising pressure on school staff. Mental health and Social Care services continue to face unprecedented demand, while there are also significant rises in requests for SEND support, statutory assessment, and access to both Pupil Referral Unit and Special School places.

Although most Essex schools and their leaders are fully committed to supporting inclusion, fair access, and the success of all pupils, many are finding the landscape an increasingly difficult one to navigate.

¹ See Appendix 1

² For example, the impact of pay awards for support staff

The challenges of the current context are acknowledged locally and nationally, including in or by:

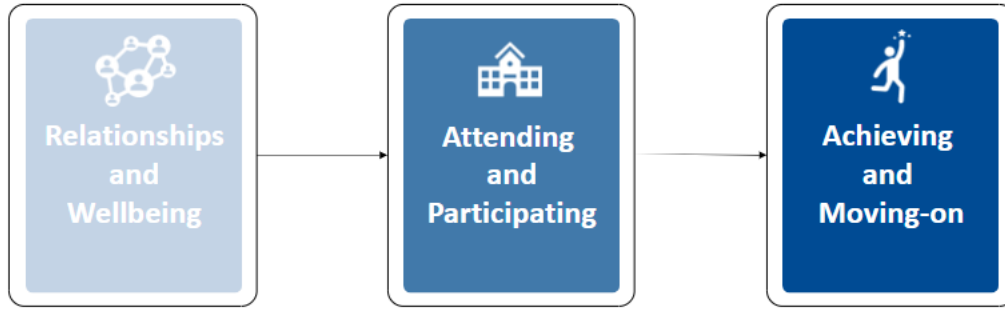
- the DfE SEND and alternative provision Green Paper
- the DfE SEND and alternative provision improvement plan
- the DfE Trust Quality Descriptions
- the DfE Multi Academy Trust Leadership Development: Chief Executive Officer Content Framework
- the Essex Education Taskforce
- the Essex Headteachers' 'Inclusion Roundtable'
- the DfE paper, Research into how local authorities are ensuring sufficient places and supporting vulnerable children

The education system must work together, and work differently, to ensure inclusivity throughout schools and settings, prioritising compassion, kindness, hope, connection, and belonging for all stakeholders.

Inclusion is a crucial priority for Essex County Council as a key element of our Transformation 2030 work. We are fully committed to working collaboratively with schools, trusts, dioceses, parents and carers, the DfE and other local partners, using evidenced-informed inclusive practices, to support the success of all pupils. We will work in partnership to level-up educational outcomes across Essex and, by doing so, we will support the lifelong learning and belonging of our children and young people.

1. The Starting Point

Pillars of the Inclusion Strategy



These pillars form the foundations of inclusion in Education. They are informed by research and engagement with families, schools and young people.

Commitments



1. The Starting Point

Delivering our commitments

Inclusion Framework

Profiling of individuals and pupil cohorts, early intervention, and opportunities to seek financial support to develop systemic inclusive practices.

Inclusion Reviews

Supportive reviews offered to all schools and academies.

Inclusion Strategy

Ongoing delivery plans

Plans that specifically focus ECC resources on the delivery of our commitments.

Support for schools and academies

Training, resources and support for schools and academies to facilitate the further development of inclusive practices, including the Ordinarily Available.

Inclusion strategy

1. The Starting Point

Getting things moving

- Review development led by consultant (recent Executive Headteacher and HMI) in conjunction with ECC teams, and grounded in ongoing ECC work (e.g. the emerging *Ordinarily Available*, and *Trauma Perceptive Practice*).
- Initially piloted across six secondary schools
- Underpinning principles:
 - No charge
 - Voluntary
 - Non-judgemental
 - Requires vulnerability
 - Will be a mirror, not a truth
 - The six pillars are central

2. Working Together

The approach to the review itself

- In-person preparation
- All review activity based around school leaders' inclusion self-evaluation:
 - Vision, context, choice of strategies, resourcing, training, stakeholder involvement
 - The six pillars
 - A simple RAG with no criteria
- After an initial meeting led by leaders, reviewers simply test the self evaluation.
- Once completed, leaders receive key findings and recommendations (and a report).
- *'True of the experience, not true of the school'*
- *'Do what you want with it...'*

3. What You Did

Reviews and review teams

- Four types of standalone review developed:
 - Four reviewers: 1050+
 - Three reviewers: 526-1050
 - Two reviewers: 315-525
 - One reviewer: below 314
- Also developed a review for Multi Academy Trusts and School-led Partnerships
- Began with a team of four
- Brought-in external reviewers
- Widened the internal team
- Now a team of 10 and growing
- Embedding QA processes

3. What You Did

The numbers

- By February half term we will have undertaken approximately 175 individual Inclusion Reviews
- By the end of 25-26 we will have undertaken approximately 225 individual Inclusion Reviews
- We have completed reviews of 10 Multi Academy Trusts (including commissioned reviews for out of county academies)
- We have completed reviews of four school-led partnerships
- We have completed our first two follow-up reviews
- We have piloted our first special school review
- We are planning our first PRU and FE college reviews

3. What You Did

Defining and measuring difference

- Yes, to individual schools, MATs and Partnerships- evaluations and feedback meetings
- Yes, to the profile of inclusion (as part of the wider work of the Strategy)
- To the issues flagged in the Inclusion Strategy position statement?
 - Enough time?
 - Developing our follow-up offer
 - Can things be purely attributed to reviews?
 - Individual difference versus systemic difference...**get the learning done, and respond to that...**

4. Difference Made

Learning

- Thematic versus specific
- Culture, vision, values and reach
- Relationships
- The pillars- sequential and cyclical
- Trauma (and policy versus practice)
- Synergy with the Inclusion Framework
- Big attendance versus small attendance
- Primary to secondary
- Getting authentic and representative voices
- Adaptation
- *Hard to reach versus seldom heard*

5. Learning and Next Steps

Next steps

- Booked for the year
- Special, PRU, and FE pilots
- Maturing approaches to learning- analysts and AI
- Highlighting specificity
- Developing the follow-up offer in response to learning

5. Learning and Next Steps

Fundamental to the process and contribute significantly to recommendations...

...the role of the Multi Schools Council and family forums?

6.Voice of CYP and Families

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