



Improving BANES' mainstream schools for neurodivergent pupils: A short report

'Children and young people with autism and conditions such as ADHD can thrive in mainstream education if their needs are supported in a timely way'¹

Who this report is for

This report is for primary and secondary school teachers and headteachers in BANES.

There's a one-page summary of this report, and an audio version, at <https://bit.ly/neurodivergent-pupils>



Definitions and abbreviations

Neurodivergent: People whose brain works differently from the 'neurotypical' majority. Neurodivergent people may be autistic, dyslexic, have ADHD, etc. In schools this is often referred to as 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN), but we prefer 'neurodivergent' as it's more positive.

BANES: Bath And North-East Somerset

Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, etc: Definitions at <https://bit.ly/nd-definitions>

Mainstream school: Schools for all young people (those with SEN plus those without SEN)

Special school: Schools for young people with SEN and/or a disability



A bit about us

We are the BANES Youth Forum.

Youth Forum is a group for anyone aged 11-18 (or up to 25 with additional needs) who's passionate about getting young people's voices heard, and making positive change.

Most of us identify as neurodivergent.

We wrote this short report with help from staff at the BANES youth charity Off The Record.

You can find out more about BANES Youth Forum, or contact us, at www.offtherecord-banes.co.uk/participation-youth-forum

Our aim

Our aim is to help make mainstream primary and secondary schools in BANES more accessible for neurodivergent young people.

Around 1 in 5 primary and secondary pupils in England are neurodivergent. Almost all of them go to a mainstream school.²

However, mainstream schools often don't work as well as they could for neurodivergent pupils.

Special schools aren't necessarily the answer, partly as there is a lack of places.

We decided to:

- 1) Research what changes at mainstream school would most help neurodivergent pupils
- 2) Give guidance to mainstream schools about making these changes

Our survey

Our survey was for 8-19 year-olds who live, study or work in BANES and who identify as neurodivergent.

We asked them what has been difficult at school, and what would make it better for them.

We shared the survey with schools, other youth groups, and with parents and carers. The survey got 78 responses, between September 2023 and March 2024.

This is what we found out:

3. Overall, how has your experience of school been?

● Good	14
● Ok	37
● Bad	27



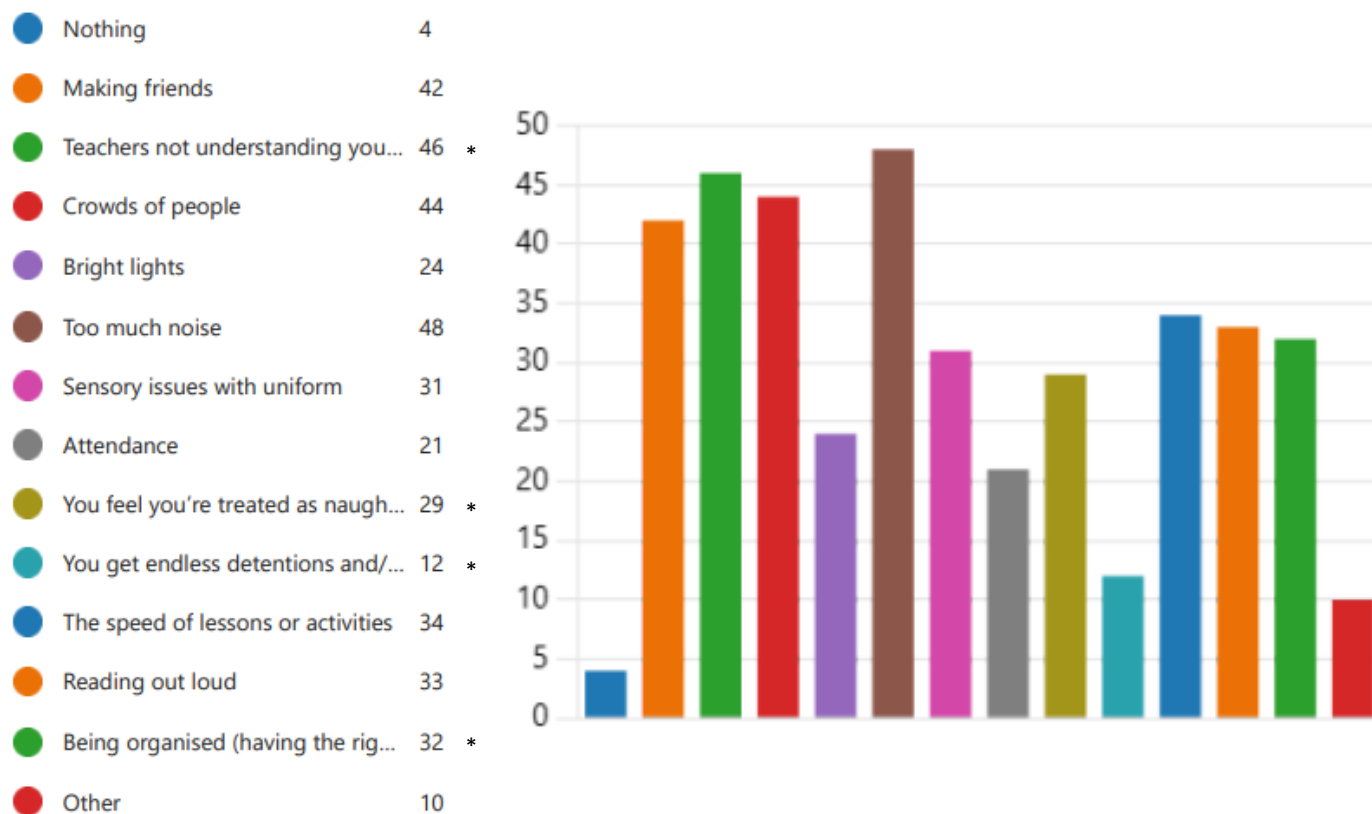
4. How often are your needs as a neurodivergent young person met at school?

● All the time	3
● Mostly	21
● Sometimes	31
● Rarely	17
● Never	6



Over 70% of the young people had missed some school due to mental or physical health issues, and/or suspension or exclusion. Several had missed at least one year of school.

8. What have you found difficult at school? (You can select more than one)



This graph shows us that neurodivergent young people in BANES have found a lot of things difficult at school. Especially:

- Too much noise
- Teachers not understanding their neurodivergence
- Crowds of people
- Making friends

* Teachers not understanding your neurodivergence

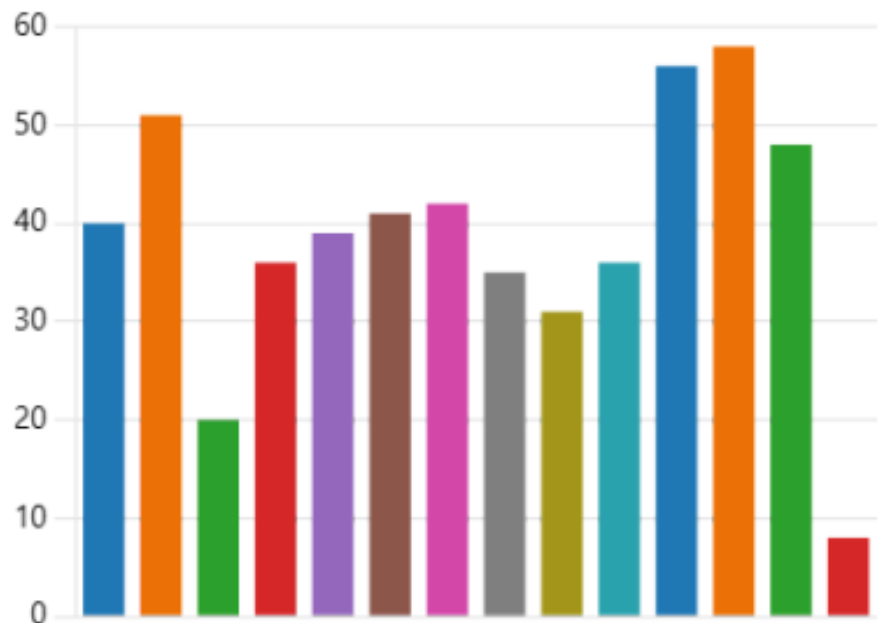
You feel you're treated as naughty or disruptive

You get endless detentions and/or sanctions

Being organised (having the right equipment, knowing where you're supposed to be, etc)

9. Which of these things would improve neurodivergent young people's experience at school? (You can select more than one)

More movement breaks	40
Quiet places to go to between l...	51 *
Printing on light pastel-coloure...	20 *
A sensory room	36
More flexibility with school unif...	39
Time-out cards	41
Being allowed to wear ear defen...	42 *
Option to sit apart from other st...	35 *
Option to join assemblies remot...	31 *
Being able to leave lessons sligh...	36 *
Not punishing neurodivergent s...	56 *
Meaningful neurodiversity traini...	58 *
Meaningful, ongoing neurodive...	48 *
Other	8



This graph shows us that neurodivergent young people in BANES say that lots of different changes would improve their experience at school. Especially:

- Meaningful neurodiversity training for school staff
- Not punishing neurodivergent pupils for something that's really difficult for them (e.g. forgetting school equipment)
- Quiet places to go to between lessons (and during lessons if needed)
- Meaningful, ongoing neurodiversity education for all students, to help increase understanding of neurodiversity and reduce prejudice

The change that the young people think would make the biggest improvement is **more neurodiversity training for teachers and other school staff**. Meaningful neurodiversity training would give school staff 'more understanding of how we work'.

* Quiet places to go between lessons (and during lessons if needed)

Printing on light pastel-coloured paper, certain fonts (e.g. Arial), no italics or capitals or underlining, etc

More flexibility with school uniform

Being allowed to wear ear defenders and listen to music through earphones

Option to sit apart from other students in classrooms and assemblies to have more personal space

Being able to leave lessons slightly early to avoid crowded corridors

Not punishing neurodivergent students for something that's really difficult for them (e.g. forgetting school equipment)

Meaningful neurodiversity training for school staff

Meaningful, ongoing neurodiversity education for all students, to help increase understanding of neurodiversity and reduce prejudice

Our recommendations

If you want to be more inclusive of your neurodivergent pupils, here are our main recommendations:

- 1) **More neurodiversity training for school staff**
- 2) **Find an alternative to punishing neurodivergent pupils for things that are very difficult for them**
- 3) **Have quiet places that neurodivergent pupils can go to between lessons, and during lessons if needed**
- 4) **Educate all pupils about neurodiversity**

You may be doing some of them already, which is great!

Our toolkit suggests how you can make each recommendation a reality in your school.

Many of the changes should help *all* pupils feel more comfortable and engaged. However, you will know if certain changes would work best if they are only applied to neurodivergent pupils.

Just remember that, in the words of one of our survey respondents: 'a lot of students will be nd [neurodivergent] but undiagnosed (especially girls)... nd students may mask well at school'.

Some of the changes may have a cost associated with them, but they will be worth it. For example, the changes should help neurodivergent pupils to engage more in lessons, and to reduce their absences from school.

How other research supports our survey findings and recommendations

Our survey findings and recommendations are strongly supported by other research.

1) 'Inclusive education', where mainstream schools support neurodivergent pupils, benefits academic achievement and social skills development.³

2) A prominent national study, which interviewed 11-16 year-olds across England in 2022, found that:

- Helpful strategies for concentration and managing emotions include: Wearing sunglasses or headphones; Doodling or fidgeting; Going to a quiet safe space
- It's important for neurodivergent pupils to feel understood, included, and listened to about what would help them

The report's recommendations to schools included:

- Discuss SEND more at school to raise awareness and make school more inclusive
- Understand neurodivergent pupils' needs, and find ways to meet these
- Have more staff training on supporting pupils with SEND⁴

3) A new report, focused on autistic pupils, recommends:

- More training for teachers to 'improve understanding and awareness of autism (and related issues)', including how to create 'neurodiverse friendly environments'

- Allowing fidget toys and doodling
- Educating other pupils about neurodiversity
- Not punishing neurodivergent pupils for ‘reacting in a non-neurotypical way’
- Movement breaks
- Relaxing school uniform policies to support pupils with sensory issues
- Less ‘visual clutter’⁵

4) More teacher training is also a key part of the government’s plan to improve support for young people with SEND.⁶

Our toolkit

We’ve created a toolkit, with guidance on how to make our recommendations a reality for your school.

The toolkit is at <https://bit.ly/neurodivergent-pupils>



References

¹ https://assets-global.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/65bc1bdd54ebfddc4e9a82f0_COYL.pdf

² <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/children-research-and-statistics>

³ <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/children-research-and-statistics>

⁴ <https://static.ons.gov.uk/files/educational-experiences-of-young-people-with-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-report-young-person-friendly.pdf> (video: <https://vimeo.com/831797802/3cff5cbc3c>)

⁵ https://assets-global.website-files.com/65b6b3c3bd2e7d160db2dbc0/65bc1bdd54ebfddc4e9a82f0_COYL.pdf

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63ff49558fa8f527f7342f80/SEND_and_alternative_provision_improvement_plan_easy_read.pdf