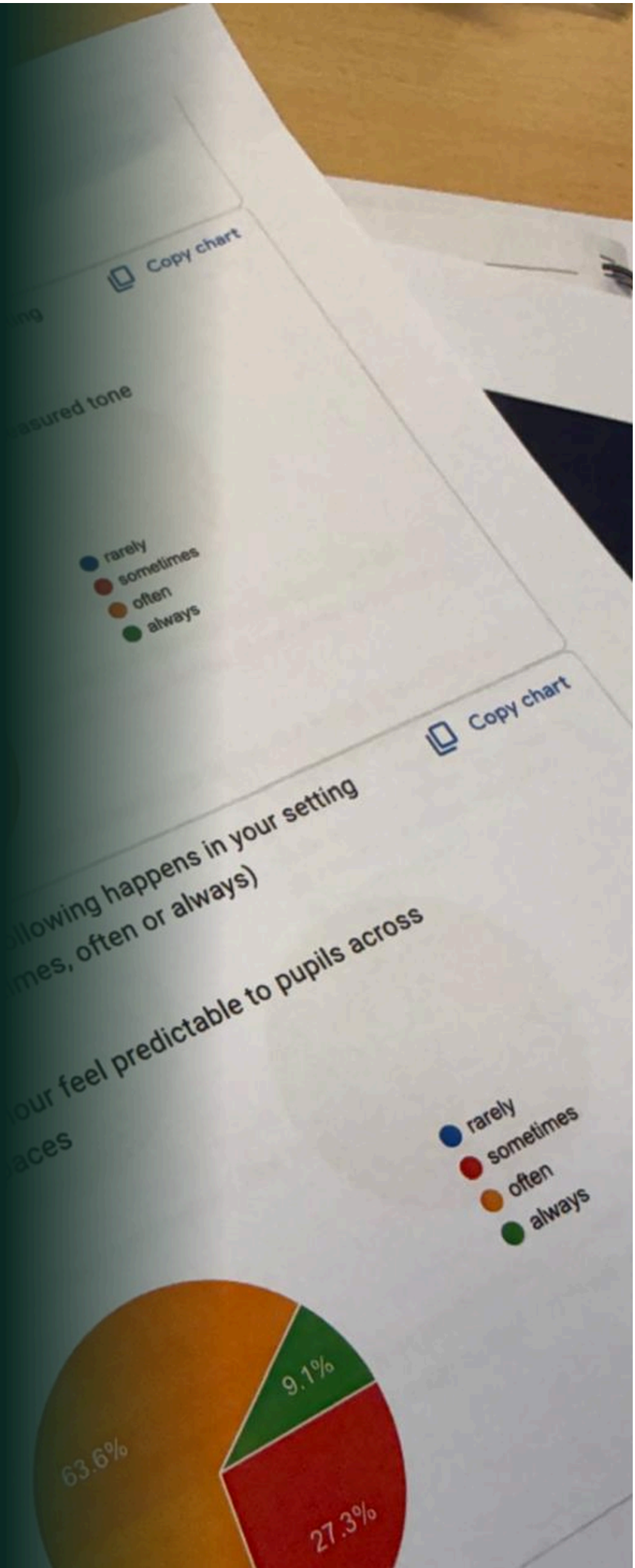
NAVIGATE EDUCATION

reimagining inclusion

making high expectations accessible in a changed childhood

INCLUSIVE MAINSTREAM FUND



October 2026

Prepared by Navigate Education

A moment worth using well

The Inclusive Mainstream Fund arrives at a point when schools have already invested years of effort in inclusion. Leaders and staff have developed SEND provision, relational and restorative approaches, behaviour systems, pastoral support, family engagement, and additional intervention, all while need has become more complex and capacity tighter. The funding creates welcome room to act and, more importantly, space to reconsider whether the ordinary experience of education is working well enough for the generation using it now.

The Department for Education asks schools to use the fund alongside core resources to strengthen inclusive universal provision and provide earlier, evidence-informed targeted support. Every school must publish an inclusion strategy by 31 December 2026, linking activity to identified barriers to learning and participation, and the guidance encourages leaders to focus on fewer approaches and implement them well. This brings more resources and a clearer responsibility to understand the barriers within the cohort, choose activity carefully and explain what a school is trying to change.

Our view is that the most useful response begins with the universal offer. Childhood, family life, technology and adult capacity have changed quickly, while some assumptions beneath teaching, behaviour, routines and support have moved more slowly. The fund comes at a critical time, giving schools an opportunity to realign those systems before further complexity grows around individual learners. Where the system and the people using it have become mismatched, stronger universal provision can broaden the circle of learners who are able to participate, learn and meet high expectations successfully.

Policy context checked 18 October 2026. This report draws on DfE and EEF guidance, recent national research, published books used within Navigate professional learning, and anonymised learning from Navigate reviews across primary, secondary and further education settings.

Childhood has moved faster than some of our systems

The young people in our classrooms are growing up through a different developmental environment from the one that many adults remember. The Department for Education's first wave of 'Growing Up in the 2020s' follows nearly 8,000 young people and describes a generation with many strengths alongside significant differences in mental health, school engagement, belonging, family circumstances and access to opportunity. The study also shows how disadvantage, SEND and lower prior attainment can cluster with less favourable experiences across several parts of life at the same time. (DfE, 2026)

Jonathan Haidt's The Anxious Generation offers one influential interpretation of the wider shift, particularly the movement from a more play-based childhood towards one shaped more heavily by smartphones, online comparison and reduced independence. The evidence about digital life is complex and continues to develop, so we use Haidt as one lens within a wider evidence base. Schools are routinely working with young people who have less experience of boredom, delayed reward, unsupervised negotiation and face-to-face social risk, alongside far more rapid stimulation and visibility online. (Haidt, 2024)

Digital life can also alter the condition in which a child arrives at school. Sustained device use can disrupt sleep, concentration and emotional regulation, and some young people show significant distress when a device is removed. Social comparison can increase sensitivity to judgement and shame. For a learner already on high alert, an ordinary correction, an unexpected transition, or a task that exposes difficulty, can carry more threat than the adult intended. These are contextual signals and should not be read as diagnoses. They still matter when we think about what a learner can access in the moment.

The same changed society surrounds adults. Scarcity of time, money and capacity captures attention and reduces the mental bandwidth available for planning and self-control, which is why the work of Mullainathan and Shafir is useful when thinking about families and staff as well as learners. TJ Power's DOSE framework gives schools another accessible way to consider the balance of reward, connection, movement, effort and recovery across the day, without reducing individual behaviour to simple claims about brain chemistry. (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013; Power, 2025)

Children remain capable and expectations remain high. The shift is that some of the capacities school relies upon may need more deliberate teaching and more thoughtful environmental support than we once assumed. Waiting, starting something difficult, tolerating boredom, recovering after frustration, asking for help, managing disagreement, sustaining attention and returning after a mistake are all learnable skills. A system becomes mismatched when it treats those capacities as prerequisites and overlooks the role education can play in developing them.

Schools have responded to rising need with enormous commitment. Many have added pastoral teams, interventions, additional adults, support spaces, behaviour programmes and new approaches to relationships. Much of that work has been valuable. The difficulty comes when support grows around a universal offer that remains hard to access for the same learners. The child receives more help while the lesson, transition, environment or expectation that repeatedly creates difficulty changes very little.

Behaviour, teaching, attendance, safeguarding, environment, pastoral care and staff wellbeing interact continuously. When those parts of the system are developed separately, adults work harder to compensate for the gaps between them. Navigate's 'Beyond the Debate' described a problem of coherence: schools are often full of strong work that has yet to function as one aligned system.

REIMAGINING INCLUSION



Realignment begins by examining what learners are being asked to access, the skills and capacity those demands assume, and the parts of the ordinary experience that could be redesigned. High expectations remain visible, with a clearer and more teachable route towards them.

Relational practice within a changed childhood

Over the last decade, relational and restorative approaches have helped many schools move away from public humiliation, adversarial behaviour management and a narrow focus on compliance. Calm consistency, simplified rules, positive recognition, greater attention to adult behaviour, and relational follow-up have become familiar parts of practice in schools seeking to protect dignity as well as maintain order. Those changes have been important, and many of the foundations remain valuable.

The challenge comes when the visible technique begins to carry more weight than it can reasonably hold. A calm script still depends on a learner having enough language and regulation to process it. A restorative conversation asks for memory, perspective-taking and enough emotional capacity to tolerate vulnerability. A warm relationship may help a child recover from a difficult moment while the task, environment or routine that repeatedly overwhelms them remains unchanged. A small number of shared rules can create useful clarity, but broad expectations such as *Ready* still need translating into the specific skills required in a lesson, transition, or social space.

These assumptions become more significant when children are already operating with less spare capacity. A learner who is exhausted after poor sleep, unsettled by losing access to a phone, highly alert to peer judgement, or carrying pressure from home may experience an ordinary reminder as one demand too many. They may need fewer words, a modelled first step, take-up time, a predictable route for asking for help, or an environment with less sensory and social load before they are able to respond successfully.

Relational practice remains an important part of strong universal provision. Its impact is greater when it sits alongside accessible teaching, skilled behaviour support, thoughtful environments and explicit skill development. The next stage is to build on what relational practice has improved and ask a stronger developmental question: what does this learner need to understand, practise, access or experience differently in order to succeed more independently next time?

Broaden the ordinary experience

Realignment means bringing the ordinary experience of school closer to the developmental reality of the people using it. That includes teaching and learning, behaviour management, routines, transitions, the physical environment, adult language, and the way that support is organised. Universal provision becomes stronger when each of those elements reduces avoidable load and gives learners a clearer route into participation.

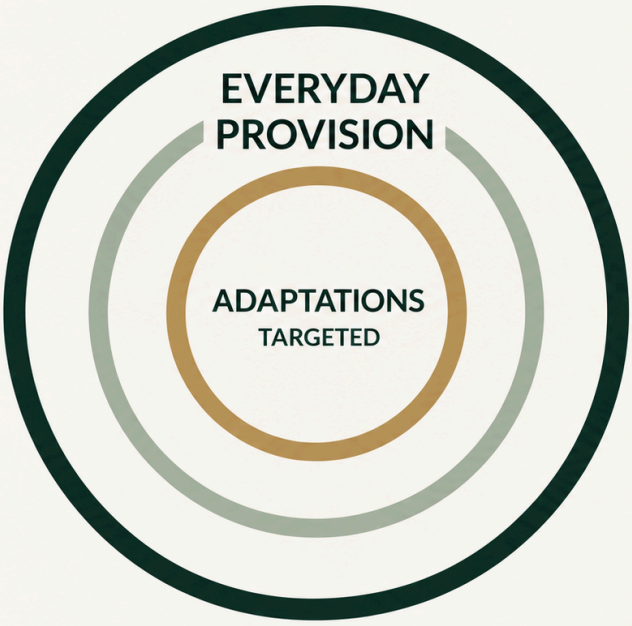
This is where aspiration and access sit together. High expectations remain visible, and adults become more precise about the skills and conditions those expectations assume. Being ready may involve regulation, organisation and attention; participation may require a scaffolded route into a question; recovery after a difficult interaction may depend on regulation, repair and a clear way back into the room. Universal provision becomes more inclusive when those routes are built into everyday practice before difficulty makes the gap visible.

The environment belongs in the same conversation. Noise, lighting, movement, seating, visual information, corridor transitions and the number of adults giving different messages all affect the capacity available for learning. Some changes will benefit almost everyone; others will remain individual reasonable adjustments. The purpose is to reduce unnecessary barriers before the learner has to fail visibly enough to qualify for help.

This is also a more sustainable use of adult capacity. When universal provision is clearer and more predictable, staff spend less time negotiating the same expectations, repairing avoidable escalation or relying on one skilled colleague to rescue difficult moments. Realignment therefore strengthens inclusion for learners while making the work more manageable for the adults delivering it.

The inclusive circle

Navigate uses the idea of broadening the circle to describe a shift from waiting for individual learners to struggle, towards making the ordinary experience easier to access from the outset. The first questions sit inside teaching, routines, transitions and environments: how clear is the instruction, how visible is the first step, how predictable is the transition, how much sensory or social load is being created, and what does a learner have to be able to do before they can even begin?



- **Broaden the ordinary experience first**
  Teaching, routines, environments and transitions should make participation easier for more learners before difficulty becomes visible.
- **Add proportionate adjustments**
  Some learners will still need changes to the route. Effective adjustments preserve thinking, participation and growing independence.
- **Use targeted support carefully**
  Targeted and specialist help should connect back to learning and everyday school life, with progress reviewed rather than assumed.

Some learners will always need individual reasonable adjustments, targeted intervention, or specialist support, and the IMF is designed to strengthen those routes as well as the universal offer. The important difference is coherence. Additional support should connect back into learning and everyday school life, preserve ambition, and be reviewed against participation, independence and progress. Its value lies in the difference it makes for the learner.

The EEF's 2026 Guide to Inclusive Teaching similarly brings together strong universal approaches with adaptations and additional support for pupils who need them, while warning that well-intentioned adaptations can hinder learning when they reduce thinking or independence. (EEF, 2026)

The standard needs a route

Simple shared rules can be a powerful anchor. A school that uses three expectations such as Ready, Respectful and Safe gives adults and learners a common destination. Access comes from making that destination concrete enough to reach in different contexts. Ready at the start of a quiet morning lesson may require very different regulation, organisation and attention from Ready after a noisy lunch, a difficult peer interaction, or a long journey into school.

Rules become more useful when adults treat them as teaching tools. They can prepare learners for what is coming, explain what an expectation looks like in the next activity, model the first step and return calmly to the shared agreement when behaviour or learning begins to drift. The same principle applies to teaching: a clear learning objective creates somewhere meaningful to return when discussion, attention or pace moves away from the purpose of the lesson.

We also need to be mindful that expectations outside school may be very different. Children do not all arrive with the same routines, language, boundaries or experience of adult authority. Predictability inside school can therefore be protective when routines and language are taught explicitly. Consistency reduces uncertainty, and scaffolding gives learners enough information and practice to act on the expectation without repeated correction becoming the teaching method.

This matters because repeated correction can consume the very capacity a learner needs to respond. Our sponge-space model describes how noise, uncertainty, disappointment, social demand, difficult work and accumulated correction can gradually fill a learner's available capacity. When the sponge is close to full, additional words or emotional pressure can narrow access to language, reflection and flexible thinking. Keeping the expectation clear while reducing the load around it often creates a better route back into learning.

The way that adults hold an expectation changes how accessible it feels. A calm boundary does not need to become a contest. The rope analogy in our training helps adults notice the point at which clarification turns into debating, pleading, irritation or a need to win. Picking up the rope emotionally consumes capacity on both sides of the interaction and can turn a simple expectation into a relationship event that is much harder to recover from.

The same principle applies to shame. Children who are highly alert to judgement can experience public correction, sarcasm, comparison or personalised language as a threat to belonging. Protecting dignity strengthens accountability by keeping behaviour separate from identity, anchoring the conversation in a shared agreement and preserving enough safety for the learner to reflect, repair and try again. Adults need practical skills for this, including take-up time, neutral language, safe handovers and the ability to pause before their own frustration shapes the interaction.

Muscle memory matters too. When an adult has experienced the same behaviour repeatedly, the brain becomes efficient at retrieving evidence that confirms the story already held about a learner or class. Deliberate noticing helps keep a fuller evidence base in view: an effort made, a calmer transition, a repair attempted or a moment when the learner managed something differently. This protects aspiration and reduces the risk that yesterday's difficulty becomes today's ceiling.

Teaching and learning belong inside the same frame. Spotlighting is a useful example because participation remains the expectation while the route can be adapted through thinking time, rephrasing, a starting point, prior knowledge or a model. Scaffolding, worked examples, I do / we do / you do, purposeful questioning and concrete resources all widen access while preserving the thinking within the task. Pedagogy and behaviour sit inside the same access conversation: both help learners reach important expectations successfully.

Accountability, repair and replacement skills

Schools need inclusion to protect learning, safety and high expectations. In some settings, repeated flexibility, endless second chances or dependence on one trusted adult have left staff feeling that inclusion asks them to absorb more difficulty. Realignment gives adults a clearer framework in which safety, dignity and access sit alongside boundaries, responsibility and deliberate teaching of what to do differently next time.

Consequences remain part of this picture because behaviour has an impact and safety matters. Their purpose becomes clearer when they are forward-facing. A consequence can restore missed learning, repair something that has been affected, rehearse a replacement skill or create the conditions for a safer return. The learner should leave with a clearer understanding of the standard and a more usable route towards it, while adults remain curious about any barrier in the task, environment or system that also needs to change.

Restorative conversations benefit from the same thinking. Reflection asks for language, memory, perspective-taking and enough emotional capacity to tolerate vulnerability, so timing and format matter. Some learners will need regulation first, a shorter conversation, a written route, a model of another person's perspective or explicit rehearsal of what to do differently. The goal is usable learning, with the learner leaving clearer about the impact of what happened and better equipped for the next difficult moment.

Repeated behaviour should also lead us towards replacement skills. Asking for help before walking out, disagreeing without becoming unsafe, returning after a mistake, tolerating a delay, recognising overload or repairing a relationship are all skills that can be explained, modelled, practised and reinforced. Understanding behaviour gives us better judgement; teaching the route gives the learner something more useful to do with that understanding.

One learner can appear in several systems at once

A learner who repeatedly leaves lessons may appear in behaviour data, attendance information, SEND discussions, safeguarding records and pastoral meetings. A child who cannot sustain participation may be described as disengaged in one system, dysregulated in another and academically behind in a third. Each category gives useful information. The picture becomes fragmented when every team responds to its own part of the problem without asking what the learner is finding difficult to access across the day.

Realignment therefore needs to connect teaching and learning, behaviour, SEND, attendance, safeguarding, family engagement, environment and leadership. A change in classroom modelling may reduce avoidance. A safer transition may improve punctuality. A predictable route for asking for help may prevent behaviour escalation. Better family communication may explain a pattern that data alone could not. Stronger support-staff practice can increase participation and independence across the day.

Schools often have care, commitment and considerable good work already in place. The pressure comes when those efforts happen in parallel. Staff carry the gaps between systems and learners experience inconsistency. The IMF creates space to strengthen coherence so that the same ambition, language and understanding of access travel through the ordinary experience and across the teams supporting it.

The same principle applies to adults. The people implementing inclusion are living in the same changed society as the children they support. Staff may be carrying financial pressure, caring responsibilities, neurodivergence, trauma, poor sleep and the cumulative effect of repeated difficult interactions alongside the ordinary demands of teaching and leadership. Scarcity matters here because a good strategy can still fail if it asks people with little spare bandwidth to remember too much, improvise under pressure or absorb more emotional load without enough support.

Some inclusion approaches quietly rely on heroic adults. They assume a teacher can remain endlessly calm, remember a long list of personalised strategies and repair every difficult interaction, or that one support worker can become the person who makes school possible for a learner. Those people often do remarkable work, but dependence on them leaves the system fragile. The goal should be shared capability, clear routines and enough depth that colleagues can step in safely when someone has reached capacity.

Professional learning therefore needs the same accessibility we expect staff to create for learners. Adults need to understand the purpose of a change, see what it looks like, practise it in manageable pieces, receive useful feedback and revisit it often enough for the response to become dependable under pressure. Insight can begin on a training day; muscle memory is built through modelling, rehearsal, coaching and repeated use in the places where the work is actually difficult.

This is also where implementation protects wellbeing. Clear escalation routes, safe handovers, predictable language and permission to ask for support reduce the need for adults to hold every situation alone. As practice becomes more consistent, fewer interactions depend on personality, chemistry or individual stamina. The setting becomes more inclusive because the adults around learners have greater access to the skills and systems they are being asked to use.

Begin with the mismatch

Attendance, attainment, suspensions, exclusions and behaviour incidents remain important outcomes. They often move after the everyday experience has already begun to change, so leaders also need indicators that sit closer to practice. These signs help teams learn early, adjust the strategy and avoid waiting until the end of the year to discover that an investment has not changed access.

LEARNERS	ADULTS AND SYSTEMS
Respond to reminders with less escalation and recover more quickly.	Use shared language with less emotional escalation or repeated argument.
Ask for help, support or an adjustment earlier.	Use routines, scaffolds and adjustments before difficulty becomes crisis.
Participate for longer and tolerate challenge with more confidence.	Hold participation expectations while offering accessible routes into them.
Return to learning after mistakes, correction or time away.	Rely less on removal, rescue and one exceptional adult to make the day work.
Use replacement skills with growing independence.	Report greater confidence and less emotional exhaustion when behaviour is difficult.
Spend more time successfully inside ordinary provision.	Review support against learning, participation and independence, and adapt it when additional provision is not improving those outcomes.

These indicators sit alongside formal outcomes and show whether the conditions beneath them are beginning to change. A learner who asks for help before leaving the room, or an adult who can return calmly to an agreement without a prolonged argument, may be showing early evidence that the system is becoming easier to access.

Use the fund to strengthen the ordinary experience

The Inclusive Mainstream Fund is intended to help schools strengthen inclusive universal provision while providing earlier targeted support for commonly occurring and predictable needs. DfE guidance asks leaders to understand the barriers within their cohort, use evidence to select activity and explain the costs within a published inclusion strategy. Schools are not required to spread investment evenly across all seven principles and can concentrate on the areas most likely to improve their offer.

That makes the order of the conversation important. Starting with a product, programme or staffing solution can lead schools to fit the problem around the spend. Starting with the mismatch creates a different discussion: where are learners repeatedly losing access, what is the ordinary experience asking of them, what is already working, what pressure is being created for adults and peers, and which part of the system would make the greatest difference if it became more reliable?

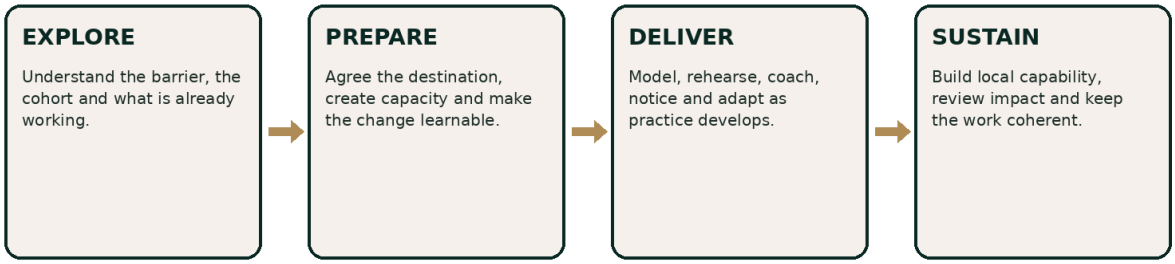
The answer may involve teaching and learning, the environment, professional development, family engagement, specialist advice, coaching, a targeted intervention or stronger leadership routines. Often it will involve more than one of those things because the barrier has been produced by several interacting conditions. Investing further upstream strengthens the conditions that shape everyday success and makes additional support more targeted, coherent and useful when it is needed.

A simple investment test

1 | Barrier	Can we describe the learning or participation barrier before we describe the solution?
2 | Universal provision	What could change in teaching, routines, behaviour practice or environment for more learners?
3 | Adult capability	What do adults need to understand, see, practise or rehearse for the change to become dependable?
4 | Additional support	Which learners will still need a reasonable adjustment, targeted intervention or specialist input?
5 | Evidence	What should learners and adults be more able to do in six to twelve weeks if the investment is helping?

Give the investment a route into practice

The IMF guidance encourages schools to choose fewer approaches and implement them well, which is important protection against another cycle of initiative overload. The EEF's 2024 implementation guidance gives leaders a useful structure through Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain. It frames implementation as an ongoing process of learning, adjustment and sustainment, with shared direction and reflection running through each phase.



For inclusion, Explore means understanding where access is breaking down and listening to the people closest to the problem. Prepare means agreeing what should be different, identifying the adults who need deeper knowledge and making sure policy, time and systems will support the change. Deliver means teaching and modelling the practice, then staying close enough to troubleshoot and adapt. Sustain means building local coaching, induction and review so the work survives pressure and external support can reduce as internal capability grows.

This is where the language of muscle memory becomes important. Adults need enough repetition that better responses are available when the room is busy, emotions are high and there is little spare bandwidth for conscious recall. Implementation is therefore part of the intervention: the quality of the route into adult practice affects whether the intended change ever reaches learners consistently.

A reflection tool for the IMF process

The indicators below are designed for leadership discussion. They help teams compare perspectives, make the process visible and identify the next part of the work that needs strengthening. A school may be secure in one area and be still developing in another, and the position should change as leaders learn more about their cohort and the impact of the strategy.

01 | Diagnose the mismatch	Leaders can describe where the ordinary experience is creating difficulty for learners or adults. Staff, learner and family experience sit alongside attendance, behaviour, attainment and SEND information so the strategy begins with the lived barrier and the setting in which it appears.
02 | Make the destination visible	The school can explain what it wants adults and learners to experience differently if the work succeeds. High expectations are translated into observable changes in participation, safety, independence, teaching, belonging and access to learning.
03 | Align the system	Teaching, behaviour, SEND, attendance, pastoral support, family engagement and leadership reinforce the same direction of travel. Leaders look for places where strong work is happening in parallel and reduce contradictions that make adults and learners carry unnecessary pressure.
04 | Broaden the ordinary experience	Teaching, routines, transitions, adult language and environments are examined before difficulty is treated only as an individual problem. Universal provision becomes more accessible while reasonable adjustments and targeted support remain available where genuinely needed.

05 | Protect ambition through adjustment	Adjustments preserve important expectations and thinking while giving learners an accessible route towards them. Leaders review whether support is increasing participation and independence, and change it when the route is no longer helping.
06 | Teach the route	Repeated difficulties lead to explicit teaching, modelling and practice of the skills learners need to succeed. Rules become tools, restorative work becomes accessible and consequences help build future success as well as respond to what has already happened.
07 | Make the change learnable for adults	Staff know why the work matters, what they need to do and where they can see it modelled. Implementation is paced so people can rehearse, receive feedback and ask for help without development becoming another source of shame or overload.
08 | Review early signals and build capability	Leaders return to practice, listen to learners and staff, and use early indicators alongside headline data to adapt the strategy. Over time, more knowledge, coaching and confidence remain within the setting and support continued improvement.

Use these indicators as a leadership conversation. They help teams see where practice is already strong, where access is still breaking down and what needs to be learned next.

Use the strategy process to realign one part of school life

A school can begin with one recurring part of the day where learners and adults are spending disproportionate energy and can look to understand it properly. It might be the start of lessons, movement after break, independent work, returning after absence, access to a support space, or the point at which repeated correction turns into removal.

UNDERSTAND	What is happening here? What are learners being asked to do, which skills does that assume, who finds it hardest and what pressure is being created for adults or peers?
DEFINE	What would a better experience look like? Keep the destination ambitious and choose one or two observable outcomes that matter to learners and adults.
REALIGN	What can change in teaching, routine, behaviour practice or environment for everyone, and which learners will still need an adjustment or targeted response?
UPSKILL	What do adults need to understand, see, practise or rehearse before the change is expected to become consistent? Decide where modelling, coaching and feedback will come from.
REVIEW	What early signals and headline outcomes will show whether access is improving? Decide when leaders will return to the practice and how the plan will change if it is not helping.

The sequence begins with understanding because inclusion rarely improves through a purchase or launch alone. Realignment needs a clear picture of the mismatch, a visible destination, a stronger ordinary experience and enough adult capability to keep learning when the first plan does not work perfectly.

A chance to realign

The ambition behind the Inclusive Mainstream Fund is significant. It asks mainstream education to anticipate commonly occurring needs, strengthen universal provision, and respond earlier when learners need something more. This creates a rare opportunity to reconsider the ordinary experience of schools and strengthen the conditions that sit underneath additional support.

Relational practice has helped education move forward by paying greater attention to dignity, adult behaviour, repair, and the quality of everyday relationships. Trauma-informed work has deepened understanding of stress and regulation. SEND expertise has strengthened assessment and adjustment, while strong pedagogy continues to show what children can achieve when teaching gives them a credible way into the learning. Reimagining inclusion means bringing all of those strands together and realigning them with the developmental reality of the generation in front of us now.

For Navigate, aspiration and access belong together. A child's current behaviour, diagnosis, starting point or family circumstances should not become a ceiling on what adults believe is possible. At the same time, high expectations become meaningful only when there is a route towards them. That route may involve clearer teaching, stronger routines, more rehearsal, a reasonable adjustment, a different environment, targeted help or specialist input, while the destination remains visible.

Broadening the circle would leave schools with stronger ordinary provision, more capable adults, and learners who remain connected to learning earlier. Shared skill and stronger systems can carry more of the work, reducing dependence on individual heroics. Repeating existing patterns of intervention and staffing without changing the universal offer risks creating more complexity around the same barriers. The real opportunity is to make the everyday experience work better for more people while preserving the additional and specialist support that some learners will continue to need.