



Yorkshire and Humber
**Change Programme
Partnership**

WAKEFIELD • LEEDS • BRADFORD • CALDERDALE



**YORKSHIRE AND HUMBER SEND
YOUTH ALLIANCE PROUDLY
PRESENTS**

**OUR EDUCATION:
SEND YOUTH
VOICES LEADING
CHANGE**





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INTRODUCTION

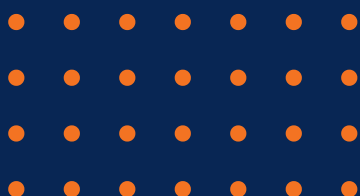


The YSEND Alliance first became involved in the CP when some of its members, who are part of the West Yorkshire Youth Collective, co-planned and facilitated a youth event hosted in Wakefield, attended by 4 other young people, who shared their views on the areas for reform using creative methods.

In response to the low numbers of participants, the YSEND was commissioned to conduct peer research with young people aged 11–19 in places they felt comfortable to understand their educational journey and how it could be improved through changes to the support and systems surrounding SEND services.

Members of the YSEND undertook training in peer research, designed their research questions, developed their own creative methods, facilitated 14 workshops with SEND young people and undertook the analysis of the results to inform and co-produce this report.

82 Young people across the 5 West Yorkshire areas who form the Yorkshire Change Programme Pilot Group participated in peer research workshops delivered either in school, college, alternative provision or youth groups. Whilst it was not hard to identify where young people are, it was harder to gain access and permission to work with them. We reached out to 80 different organisations across West Yorkshire and provided an opportunity for SEND young people and parents and carers to learn more about the Change Programme and feed in their experiences at the SEND next choices event in Leeds. The YSEND also represented young people at each of the Change Programme information and learning events, delivering key messages from not only their own experiences but also the SEND young people they represent in their local communities.





DECIDING WITH US, NOT FOR US

“Every day, young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are impacted by decision making from all levels of government. Whether that is in education when a young person chooses their own pathway into Further and Higher Education, engaging with local support services, and attending EHCP annual reviews; young people with SEND interact with the services in their community that have been designed and legislated for by decision-making processes from Whitehall to their local Town Hall when implemented locally.

SEND Young People develop a unique expertise from their everyday lives, especially when many are preparing for adulthood. Through opportunities for discussion where SEND Young People can bring knowledge and perspective to ensure more inclusive outcomes for future cohorts of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Allowing SEND young people to have the platform to contribute their vision for the SEND system can inform the improvement in those exact processes as the public develops more awareness on the diversity of needs.

For the change programme, SEND Young People deserve to contribute as partners in delivering that positive change within their educational career. The insights from these contributions are beneficial for all stakeholders in informing policy changes, empowering young people with SEND to build their confidence, leadership and collaboration skills when taking part in democracy as well as raising awareness on stakeholder perspectives on education reform for policymakers and partners. There are so many opportunities for the future collaboration with SEND experienced Young People in making a positive difference for an education system that can be attentive to their needs and aspirations. The Change Programme is an important first step for such dialogue. " **-Member of Yorkshire and Humber SEND Youth Alliance.**

THE PEER RESEARCH

The initial overall findings indicate that a significant proportion of young people are unaware they have an EHCP (Education Health Care Plan); consequently, the majority are either unaware of or do not have regular reviews to update their plans. Each LA uses a different form, criteria, and what support they are willing to provide – there is no consistency, which makes understanding the process hard for both young people and their parents and carers. Young people feel like a problem, like an inconvenience, and their parents feel this too. There are countless examples where parents, caregivers and young people themselves have had to advocate



for their child/themselves in school and challenge the decisions being made by professionals to get the right support for their son or daughter/themselves, with countless complaints and concerns around lack of training and understanding.

Through working with the peer researchers, and the contact with schools, colleges, alternative provision and youth groups, it became apparent that professionals working with young SEND people were unaware of the Change Programme and how they could be involved in shaping future services.

Following the first phase of the research, in response to the lack of awareness about the Change Programme, the YSENDa coproduced an animation to share with young people, parents/carers and professionals to help them better understand what the change programme is and what it has been designed to do. Please watch the young people's animation below.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5h1_KSxFjK8



RESEARCH AIM

To understand young people's educational experiences and how these can be improved.

METHODOLOGY

Focus groups.

RESEARCH METHODS

The peer researchers used creative research activities to develop education journey maps and conducted informal interviews with SEND young people .

The focus group were recorded, transcribed, and the data was analysed with the peer researchers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



The questions the peer researchers asked young people:

- Did/do you have a support plan (IEP, EHCP)? Do you know what one of these is and what it's used for?
- How did your teachers inspire you?
- If school/college/university was bad, why was it bad? What could have made it better?
- If school/C/U was good, why was it good? What made it a brilliant/bad place for a young person with Special Educational Needs?
- What was it like moving to a big school/C/U?
- Were you scared or supported?
- Do you feel cared about in education?
- Do you feel lonely at school/college/university?
- Do you think people in school/C/U get the best out of you?
- Are you prepared for adulthood? For getting a job, for living independently?
- If you are then how has that happened? If you're not then what do you need?
- Do you know your rights in education?
- What are your dreams and how can you be helped in achieving them?
- Each focus group was recorded, transcribed and the data coded by the peer researchers.



FINDINGS

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES HAD TO SAY...

KEY CHALLENGES

- **Lack of Adulthood Preparation:** A significant challenge is the feeling that education settings do not adequately prepare students for independent living. One interviewee felt they were not taught practical skills like getting organised or taking public transport and instead had to learn these from their family.

“I mean no one has ever helped or sat me down and said you know here’s how to get organised and ready to do things on your own more.”

“It would have helped me if they would have supported me in managing, like understanding money like you know like paying bills and things like that.”

“My mum asked the staff but they had no idea what preparation for adulthood was and no idea where to tell kids to go about career info and stuff like that.”

- **Limited Knowledge of Educational Rights:** The young people interviewed generally had little to no knowledge of their educational rights. They were also unsure how to challenge a situation where their EHCP plan was not being fully implemented. No emphasis on youth voice participation and no platform/outlet to ask questions, challenge decisions etc.

“I didn’t really know that was an option, that I could say these are my rights or what my rights are.”



- Inconsistent and Ineffective Support:** Some interviewees felt that their needs were not taken as seriously as others by school staff. Support seemed to be inconsistent, particularly during transitions between schools (transitions in between years). Some teachers help, others don't; some teachers put things in place properly while others don't, so the intervention isn't effective; some teachers listen and take SEND young people seriously but for the most part they don't-too busy, not enough resources etc. Lots

of examples where staff haven't used the EHCP or SEND plan or haven't put the right reasonable adjustments in place (breaking down instructions, now and next approach

"I didn't get the support I needed. In high school, I just got left because I was quiet and I didn't kick off."

"Even when they've seen my plan, well they haven't followed it. And it's like I know if I was naughty or if I were physically sick they would follow it."

"The teachers were aware of my brother's EHCP but they didn't take it into account until we stepped in to tell them that it's affecting him and it's also affecting us as well sometimes. He used to cry every single morning and every single afternoon after coming home from school, like please don't send me and obviously, you kind of have to send them."

"So I wasn't given the right support and I had lots of mental health issues because of it."



- **Bullying and Negative School Experiences:** Bullying is a significant and recurring challenge for many SEND young people in education. In most cases, young people have been forced to leave their schools because of bullying and discrimination. Young people felt that schools are unable to adequately deal with bullying and provide support to those affected. They also commented on feeling stigmatised by staff and in some cases discriminated against.

Young people share experiences of discrimination and bullying in educational settings, particularly focusing on how support needs are highlighted in ways that can stigmatize students. They explored how some staff either refuse to provide necessary accommodations or make them overly visible, which can lead to negative social consequences for students who just want to 'fit in'. The discussion also highlighted examples of both problematic staff behaviour and those who go above and beyond to support students, though the latter are not common enough.

Classroom environments cause distress and overwhelm with very few adaptations/adjustments made to support young people for example restricting access to fidgets, not allowing movement breaks, not having things to support alternative seating or other classroom aids which help minimise becoming overwhelmed and distressed such as aids and assistive technologies like iPads and laptops. It is clear from the data that a supportive, well-resourced school environment and understanding staff are crucial in preventing/addressing bullying and in fostering a safe and positive experience for all.



“The year after I had to leave due to bullying, so I’ve been home schooled since the start of the year but I liked it at high school before I got bullied, it was nice being more independent like being able to go get the bus on my own to school.”

“Yeah, they said they did and they would try and help but it was never good enough like it was never taken seriously enough. They’d get a slap on the wrist and that was it, they’d start again the next day.”

“I think if there was a better way to deal with bullying and people were more accepting and understood us better, I could have stayed at high school, which is sad to think. That makes me sad.”

“But like when you were being bullied and you have to report it, they would say lets ask the bully and that would just make things worse. They had no proper way of dealing with things and there was no proper support for people who were struggling.”

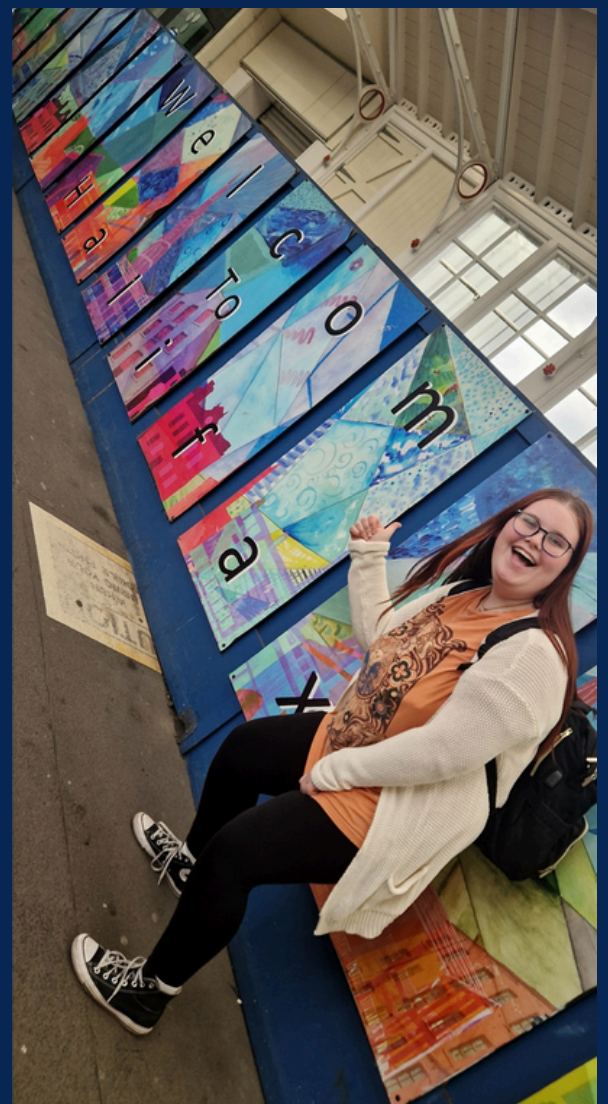
“They isolated me and used to trap me in a room if I got angry, people don’t believe me but they made fun of me and I did not deserve that. I felt scared.”

“I went to two different primary schools and four different secondary schools because I got bullied out of them, then went to a specialist school then went to college.”

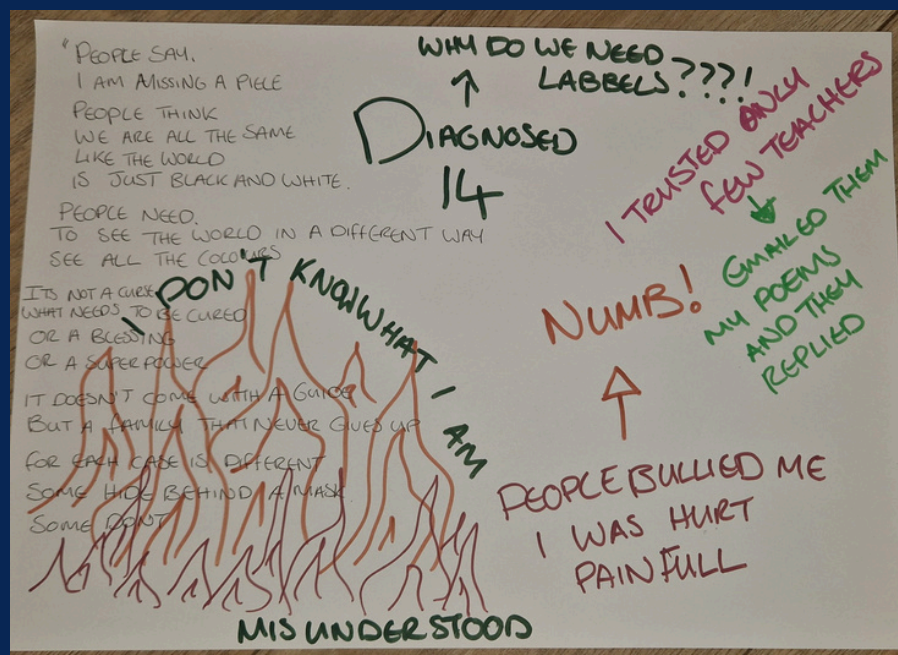
“It was very hard and overwhelming for me as I was always made to feel different by kids and even some staff, they’d think I was weird and I got bullied.”

“Older people bullied me and they did do stuff but like in a way like they didn’t want to try hard enough, so like it would stop for a bit and then happen again.”

“They knew about my learning difficulties and they would sometimes lash out on me if I got things wrong and they would think I got it wrong just to annoy them so they would snap at me.”



“I would have loved to stay there if I wasn’t bullied and I don’t blame the teachers that much because what can you do? You know you’ve got all your different classes to deal with, there’s not enough staff.”



Uncertainty About Future Support:

While students appreciate the specialised support they have now, interviewees expressed concern that this level of support would not continue in their new educational setting. The onus is on young people (or in many cases, families) to know their rights, communicate their needs and push for support.

“I don’t know what sort of support I’m going to get and I’m worried they won’t know what to do again.”

“My mum had to fight to get them to listen to us and put things in place for my needs. It started to get better at my old school and then you have to move into big school and you have to start all over again.”

- **Lack of Training/Understanding/Acceptance of ND and Additional Needs:** Professionals working with young people have very little or no knowledge of ND and haven’t had the training to be able to specifically support and respond to SEND young people. Lack of awareness and acceptance makes support inconsistent and ineffective. In most cases, it is the parents of CYP who must challenge settings to listen and act.

“They didn’t really know how to support me because they had no understanding, they just thought I was disruptive.”

“The teachers didn’t really know what to do or how to help me.”

“Like I struggle with taking information in and the teachers didn’t realise recognise that so I feel like I could have done better if they’d have known and been able to help.”

“I just needed respect and for them to understand my differences, to support us to be who we are in our own way.”

“When I went to people who knew about autism, I started to do well and I’m still doing well. I started learning at school.”

“Teachers don’t have the proper training. My mum had to help them understand me and autism and how this affected me in my education.”

“They don’t understand it, and you end up being very alone most of the time.”

“I was suffering on the inside and outside.”

“I think a lot of us SEND kids feel isolated.”



- **Better Educational Experiences in Further Education:** Most young people report that they preferred college and HE as they were treated better by staff and listened to more. They also reported back that staff would implement reasonable adjustments better in further education. Young people commented on how schools are too set in their ways they don’t allow flexibility to adapt things to meet young people’s needs. Young people emphasized the need for more funding, staff, and flexibility in educational approaches during secondary, noting that colleges often provide better support due to their more adaptable structures.

“I made friends and stuff at college. It was a lot easier because people aren’t as rude, immature and mean, but also because the building also has a lot of other people who kind of just struggled in similar ways to you. It’s easier to connect with people at college and make friends. Now I’ve gotten settled in and used to it its really fun going to college.”

“I have so much support, like on days where I’ve maybe woken up late or I’m feeling like I don’t want to go in, I’ve been told I’m allowed to go in late as long as I actually get to college and that has really helped me to just push past the that barrier of like the anxiety. You feel like your tutor cares and wants to support you.”

“I didn’t feel cared for in high school but I felt cared for in college and whenever I have an issue I can talk to someone straight away to like sort it out, so any problems get resolved and you feel really looked after.”

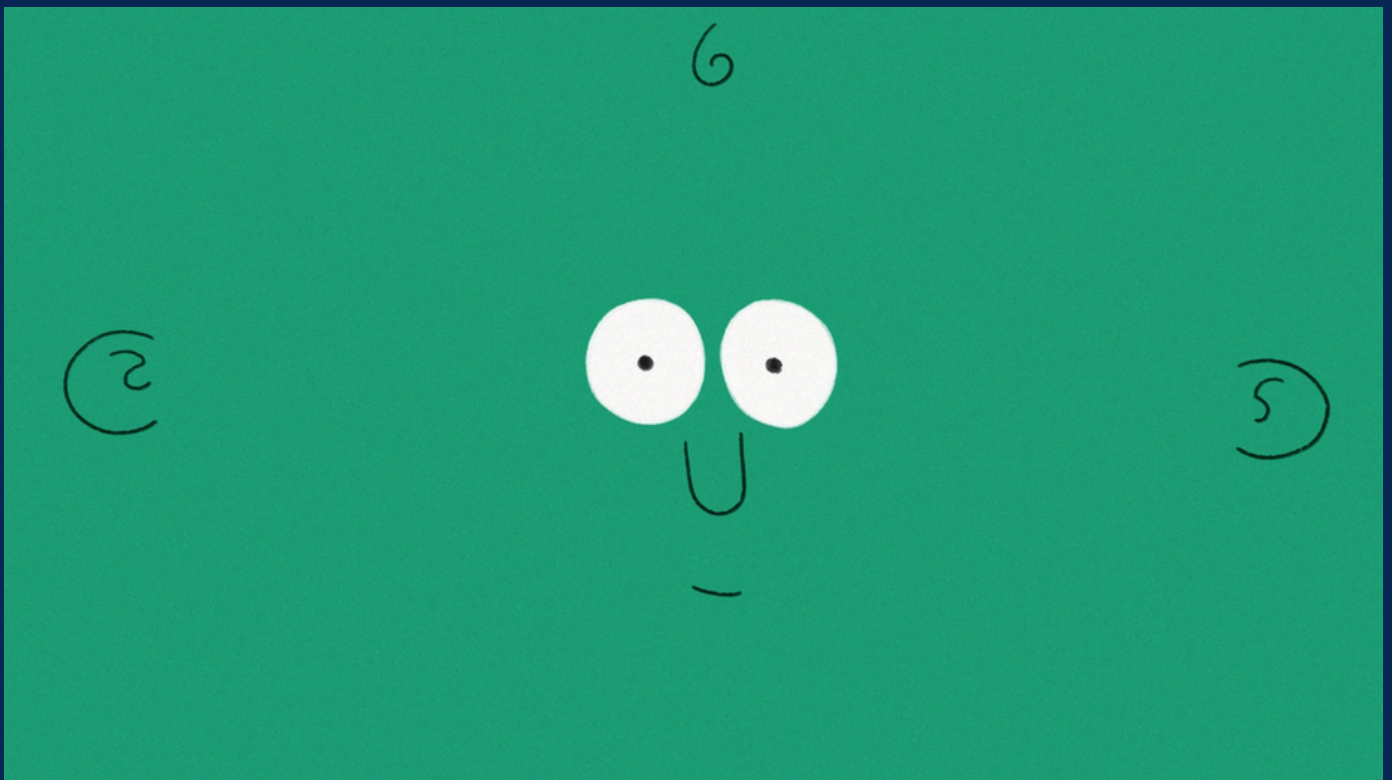
“I’m a happier person when I come to college and they make me feel like I want to come. Its like the teachers here treat me better than they did at school, like an person like everyone else.”

“College understood how to help, I was able to express myself when and however I wanted.”

“In college I got a lot more support.”

“I felt way more supported and encouraged at college, it was more chilled and relaxed and less nit picky than secondary school.”

“I improved my communication skills once I started college, so they have helped me very much.”





- **Ableist Assumptions and Lack of Support Around Employment, Ambitions and Pathways:** Most young people comment on how others made decisions for them around what they were able to achieve and which training courses and jobs they could apply for. Many are encouraged to be volunteers, which can last for years, rather than progress to paid employment.

“I mean, my ultimate dream would be probably to move to the coast and open my own book store or maybe become a paralympic swimmer. That’s a long way off though because its not something people think I could do.”

“What do we need to label everyone for? As soon as people know you have SEND, they think you can’t do things or you won’t go on to to get a good job because you can’t.”

“They never encouraged me to follow my passion for poetry, they didn’t think I was academically able.”

“They didn’t want to help me think about what I’d like to do when I grew up, and they wouldn’t take me seriously when I asked to find out how I could open my own business.”

COMMON THEMES

- **The Importance of Staff and Environment:**

A recurring theme is that a positive educational environment and supportive staff are crucial for a good experience. Students who felt cared for, understood and supported by their teachers and tutors had a better experience. Young people are in a better place to learn when their needs are being met, and they are being listened to by professionals (who don't always know best).



“The EHCP has helped me in some areas, but its just about the place and whether they actually use them and put the support you need in place. It helps when the teachers get it and don't make you feel bad for it, like we're too much hard work.”

“Some of the teachers don't have the proper training or the expertise.”

“Being in mainstream overwhelmed me with my condition...it's quite loud and way too big, there's too many buildings to get around and too many people.”

“It was quite a small school and they helped you to be more independent, they gave you a budget which helped you understand money better.”

“It's like last year I had to move from college because they couldn't meet my needs so they tried suspending me.”

“I want to be treated like everyone else.”

“It's the staff and the school that are most important, what makes it good is if they're good and have time for you.”

“Maybe if the teachers spent a bit more time with you before you go to a new school to get to know a little bit more about you as well as looking at your plans that would help. Especially with the move all the way from primary to secondary school, it can be a big shock.”

- **Aspiration for Independence:** The young people interviewed have a strong desire to live independently and get a job in the future. They are very focused on preparing for adulthood and achieving their future goals. Most of the young people that took part didn't feel as though their schools and colleges brought out the best in them or supported them enough to realise their ambitions.

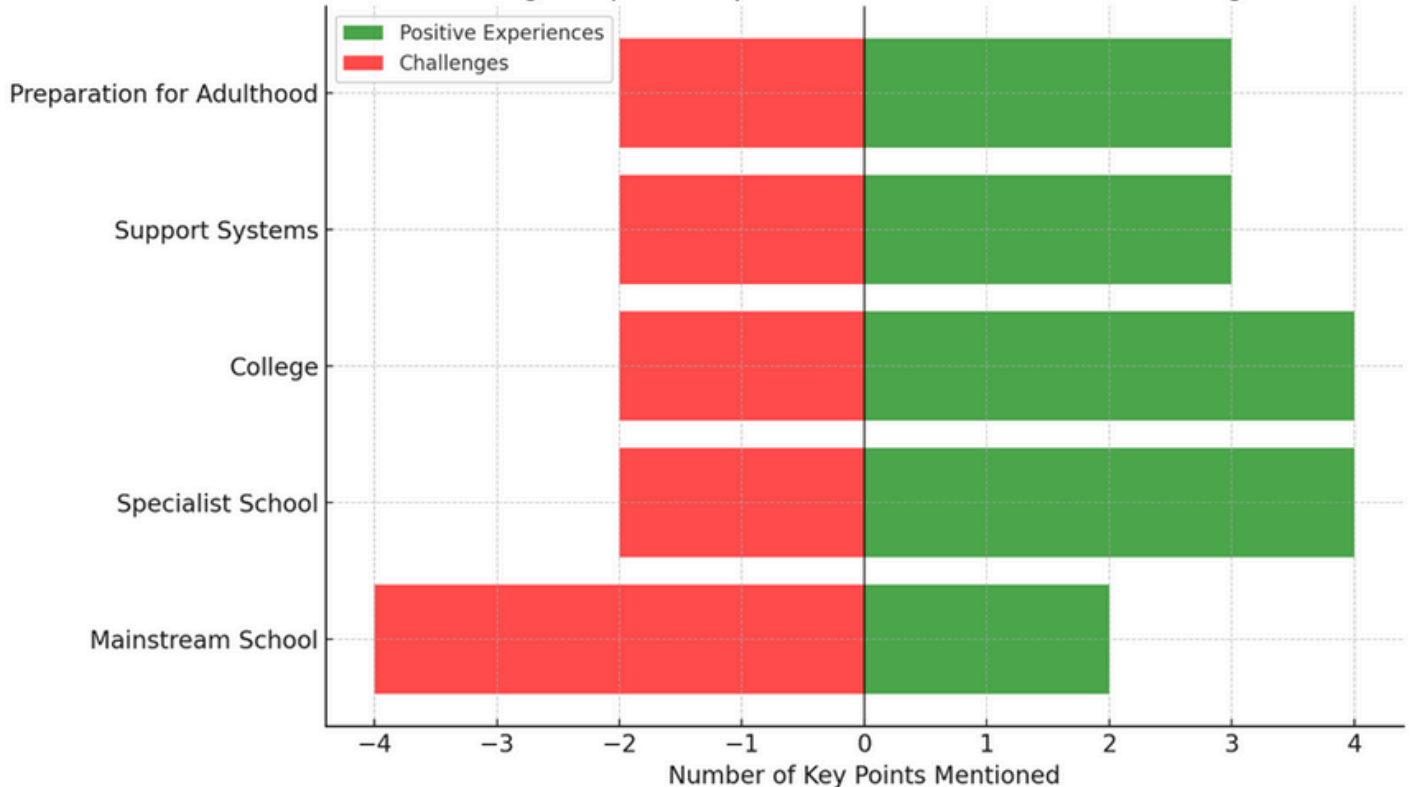
"I would love to work on a cruise but I'll probably never get to do that and my second dream job is to work in an airport."

"My dream is to become a lawyer."

"There's so many systems stacked against you."



Young People's Experiences: Positives vs Challenges



Young People's Experiences: Positives vs Challenges

	Positive Experiences	Challenges
Mainstream School	✓ Inspiring teachers ✓ Enjoyed art/sport	✗ Bullying ✗ Isolation ✗ Misunderstood ✗ Moved schools
Specialist School	✓ Small & safe ✓ Independence ✓ Fun trips ✓ Respect	✗ Transition shock ✗ Funding limits
College	✓ Respectful staff ✓ Choice ✓ Achievement ✓ Understanding	✗ Generic pathways ✗ Limited options
Support Systems	✓ Parent advocacy ✓ Mentors ✓ Supportive staff	✗ Confusing EHCPs ✗ Lack of involvement
Preparation for Adulthood	✓ Cooking & budgeting ✓ Work placements ✓ Dreams & aspirations	✗ Poor planning ✗ Unaware of rights



POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

1. Supportive Learning Environments

- Colleges often felt more accommodating and respectful than schools.
- Smaller or specialist schools created safety, independence and joy.
- Supportive staff who calmly explained mistakes without judgment made a big difference.

“The best school I had was a small school...best three years. I just loved it every minute... and they were helping you to be more independent.”

“College is a bit more better because they were able to accommodate for me and my needs... they go over it calmly without losing their temper.”

2. Opportunities for Independence

- Residential schools and certain college programmes gave young people independence skills like budgeting, cooking and making decisions.
- Having responsibility (e.g. money allowances, cooking classes) helped them feel more prepared for adulthood.



“We used to get more money every week... getting independence.”

“I go to the cooking class... it’s so good, like we get to cook lasagna or pasta bakes... I’ve got to learn about budgeting as well.”

3. Positive Relationships with Teachers & Advocates

- Some teachers inspired them to keep going, showing encouragement.

- Family members (especially parents) were strong advocates in challenging situations.
- Key staff (like mentors or advocates) provided safe channels for expressing concerns.

“I have some teachers [who] have inspired me to keep going and not give up.”

“My mum... as soon as she hears me get suspended, she’s like a soldier, ringing them within 30 seconds.”

“I did have someone who I could go to and express my concerns.”

4. Enjoyable Learning & Activities

- Subjects like art, media and sports were motivating and gave young people something to look forward to.
- Day trips and practical learning (seaside, residential activities, cooking classes) stood out as positive highlights.

“Day trips to the seaside... it was about fun, not just learning.”

“Maisie’s really good at art and stuff... she wants to be an art therapist.”

5. Sense of Achievement & Recognition

- Passing English or completing tasks successfully at college gave a huge confidence boost.
- Being treated as a “human being, not just a student” made them feel respected and valued.
- Creative expression, like poetry, was recognised as a talent and encouraged.

“They encouraged me to try GCSE English and I nailed it. I was so happy.”

“Would you say they treated you more like a human being than a student? — ‘Yeah. I always say... I want to be treated like everyone else.’”

“That poem... very creative, that is amazing, blown me away.”

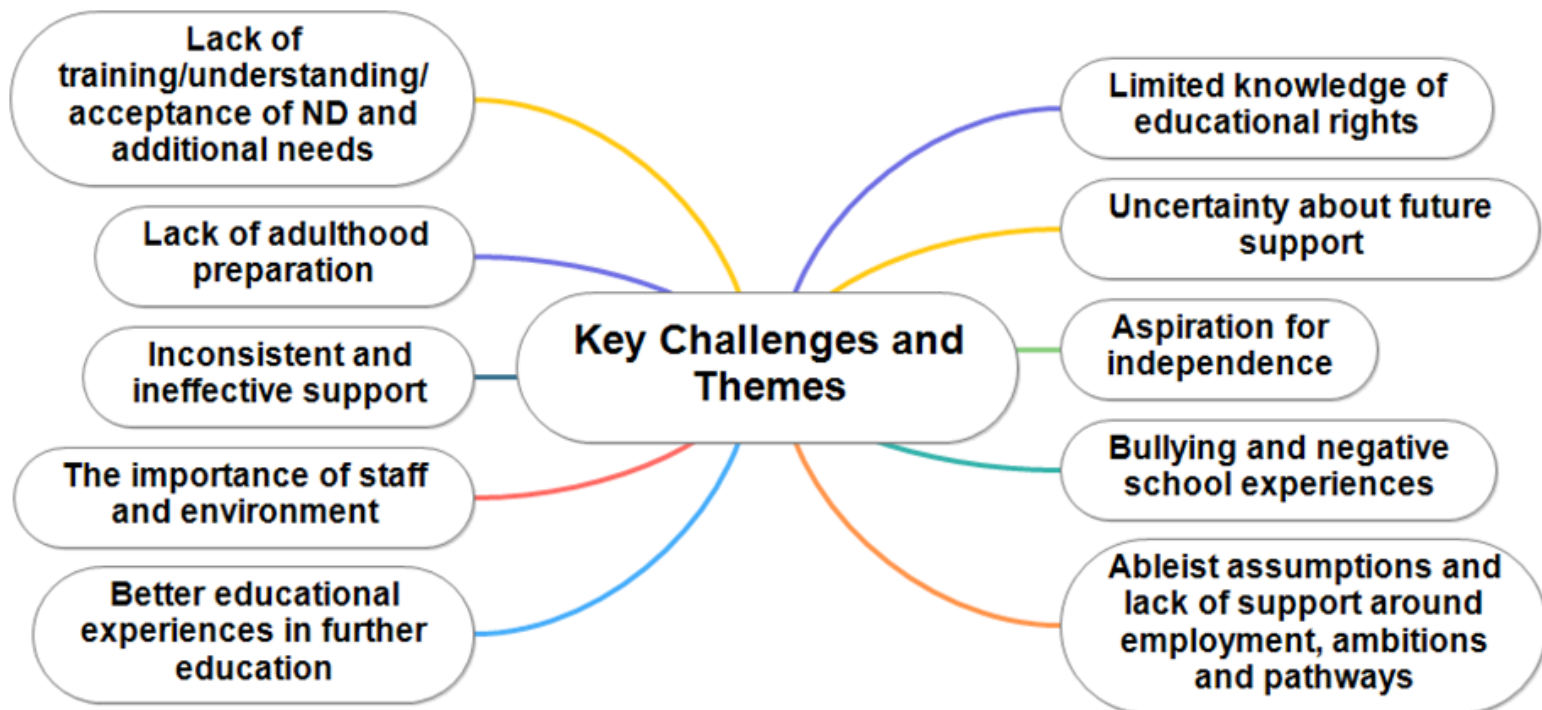
6. Future Aspirations & Dreams

- Many expressed clear ambitions: becoming an art therapist, film director/blogger, or support officer for people with disabilities.
- Work placements and career pathways (like Bradford’s employment programme) were seen as hopeful opportunities.

“I want to be like a director or film blogger... hopefully I’ll get a placement.”

“I would like to be a support officer for people with disabilities... I always love helping other people.”





CLOSING STATEMENT WRITTEN BY ONE OF OUR YOUNG LEADERS

This report, conducted by the YSEND Alliance, indicates the significant challenges that children and young people face across education and access to support and systems surrounding SEND services across West Yorkshire. These included the lack of adulthood preparation, limited knowledge of educational rights, inconsistent and ineffective support, bullying and negative school experiences, uncertainty about future support, lack of training/understanding/acceptance of ND and additional needs, poor educational experiences in further education, and ableist assumptions and lack of support around employment and ambitions. 82 children and young people took part in focus groups across West Yorkshire.

The report highlights the significant challenges faced by most young people. While some children and young people shared positive experiences, these experiences were overshadowed by significant shared negative experiences, which raised several questions.

- Why are our experiences in education mostly negative?
- Why do we experience a lack of adulthood preparation and independent living skills?
- Why are we not included in youth voice and design making?
- Why is support inconsistent and ineffective, or difficult to access?
- Why is support reduced or restricted?
- Why are classrooms not accessible, overwhelming, and not adapted?
- Why were we experiencing more bullying and discrimination from peers and discrimination from educational staff and professionals?

- Why is there limited training, understanding, training/understanding and acceptance of ND and additional needs?
- Why do we experience ableist assumptions and a lack of support around employment, ambitions and pathways?
- Why is there poor and limited support for the SEND and SEND services and systems?
- Why are we uncertain about future support?
- Why are we not allowed, discouraged or restricted from following our dreams and aspirations?
- Why is this happening and being allowed to happen?
- What can be changed?

As the report shows, change is needed. The government, professionals and educational staff must understand how the current SEND systems, attitudes, beliefs, and decisions are not working and are having a detrimental impact on our lives as children and young people and our future opportunities. We should be part of the decisions made about our lives and futures. We know what we need and how to make our lives better. Additionally, decision makers must consider the impact their decisions have on us and our families.

We hope that this report highlights the challenges that we face across education, accessing support and systems surrounding SEND services, and how positive changes can be made. No child or young person should experience the challenges highlighted in the report, but this is what we experience. Change is needed to improve our lives, to stop the detrimental impact on our lives, and the negative experiences that we face living with SEND daily.

Why should we be restricted and stopped from achieving our goals and dreams?

Change is needed!

Thank you for reading our report.

If you would like to discuss the report with us, please contact the Yorkshire SEND Youth Alliance.





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THANK YOU

