Essex County Council
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Missing Voices



Working together for Essex

Multi School Council

We may all be different but we have the same smile

About the MultiSchools Council

The Multi-Schools Council (MSC) exists to promote positive perceptions of young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or mental health challenges. Much of our work involves visiting schools and listening directly to young people, whose voices help shape our strategic direction.

Over the past four years, school attendance has consistently emerged as a key concern. This led to our initial report in 2022, which can be accessed **on our website**. However, we've increasingly found that many young people are accessing education outside of the traditional school model, and their voices are equally important.

In 2025, we made a conscious decision to visit a range of alternative provisions to hear from these young people. The settings included in this report (kept anonymous to protect identities) range from pupil referral units and therapy farms to car garages, youth centres, and home-based learning environments.

Introduction

This report amplifies the voices of young people who have experienced both mainstream and alternative education.

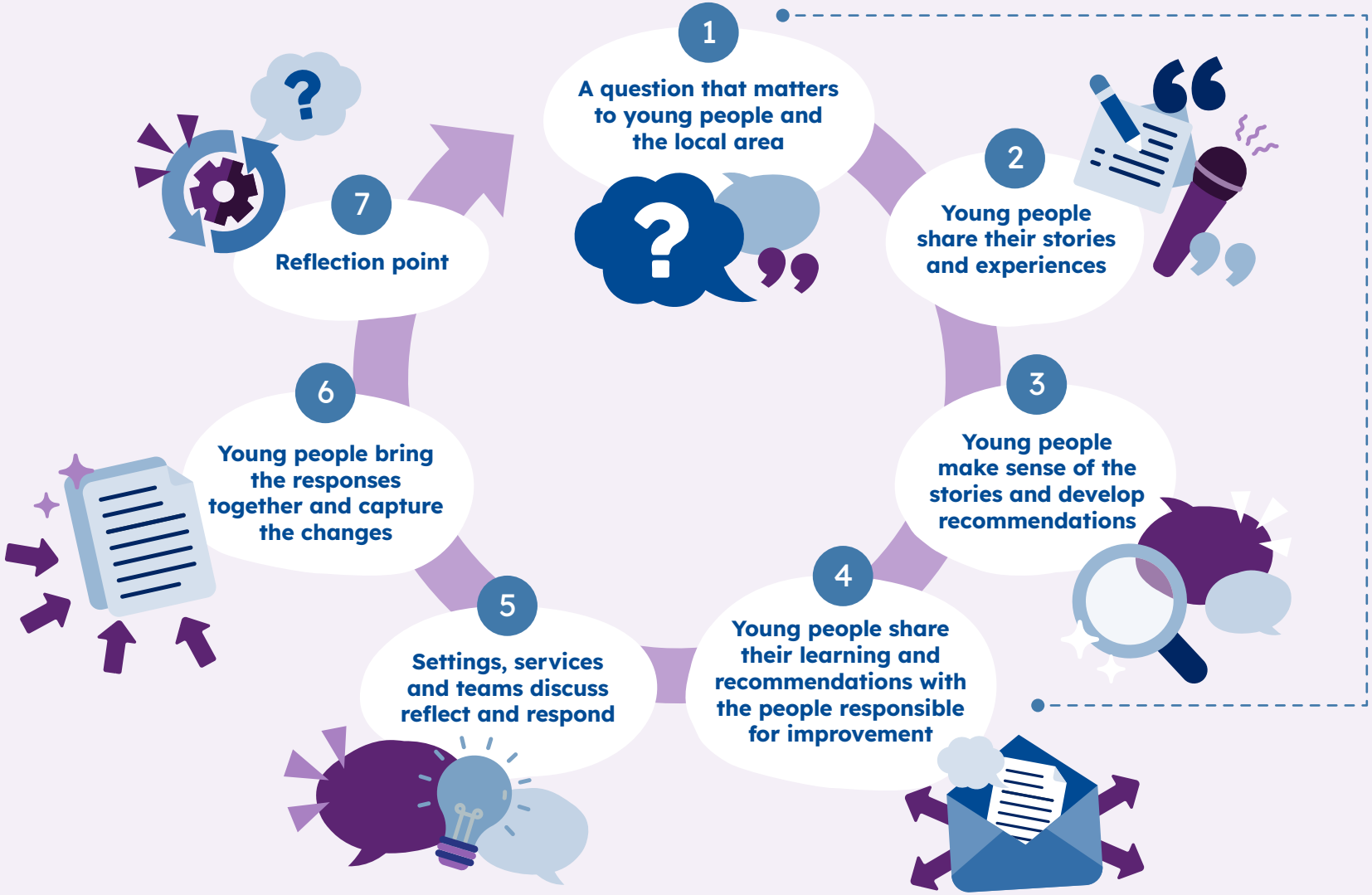
It focuses on their strengths, aspirations, and the positive elements they value in alternative settings. Rather than framing their experiences as shortcomings, it highlights opportunities for growth and collaboration.

Through their insights and recommendations, these young people offer practical ideas for creating educational environments that are inclusive, supportive, and empowering for every learner.

The Multi-Schools Council Cycle

A Young Person-Led Approach

Young people are involved from start to finish. They help make sense of the stories, develop the recommendations, and review the responses they receive.



How this report fits within the Multi-Schools Council cycle

Missing Voices captures the first four stages of the MSC cycle. Young people have shared their experiences, identified key themes and developed recommendations for change. This publication represents the point at which young people's findings and recommendations are shared. We now welcome responses from leaders so that the conversation can continue.

The idea is simple: **Young people speaking to young people, with adults supporting the process rather than leading it.**

1 A question that matters to young people and the local area



Together we form an enquiry question. The question focuses on young people's experience – no blame, no judgement. For example, "What could we learn from young people in Alternative Provision about their experiences in mainstream schools?"

2 Young people share their stories and experiences

Young people share their experiences in their own words, in their own way. The MSC team capture the stories of the young people – with no translation into professionals' language. This stage is about listening, not interpreting. The accounts are not intended to present a single story, but to reflect the complexity of young people's experiences.

3 Young people make sense of the stories and develop recommendations



Young people review the accounts and ask:

- What matters here?
- What do adults need to understand?
- What would make a difference?

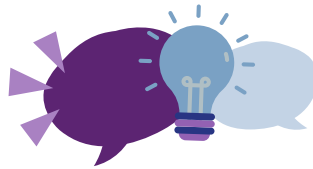
Young people create simple practical recommendations that sit alongside the accounts. The MSC team support the process, but do not decide the content or priorities. Where young people disagree, that is recorded, rather than resolved.

4 Young people share their learning and recommendations with the people responsible for improvement

Accounts and recommendations are shared with those who can act on the learning and support change. Settings, services and leaders are invited to respond to young people's recommendations.

5 Settings, services and teams discuss reflect and respond

An opportunity for teams, services and settings to reflect, wherever possible with young people:



- What are we doing well?
- What could we change?
- What will we do next?

Responses could include:

- A letter to the young authors with what they have taken from the accounts
- A response created with young people in their school/setting – from young people to young people
- Examples of good practice and/or an invitation to visit to discuss good practice in their setting or team

6 Young people bring the responses together and capture the changes

Young people, supported by the MSC team, bring together the responses and identify examples of good practice. The final chapter brings together learning from across the system and highlights what is changing. The completed report is then published and shared.

7 Reflection point



The cycle returns to where it began: the original question.

- What is improving across the system?
- What still needs to change?
- What now?

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Why we've written this in the first person

This report is about the voices of young people — and we wanted that to come through clearly.

Writing in the first person helps us stay true to their experiences and perspectives, rather than presenting them as distant or abstract. It reflects the conversations we had, the emotions shared, and the real stories behind the recommendations. By using "we" and "I," we aim to make this report feel personal, authentic, and grounded in lived experience—because these voices deserve to be heard directly, not filtered through formal language.

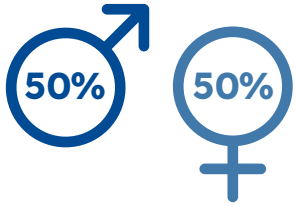
Context and scope

The findings are based on direct conversations with young people across various alternative provision settings. As part of the agreement with the young people, we agreed that the settings would remain anonymous.

We spoke with 66 young people. 75% of the young people were secondary-aged students (aged 11 to 16); 25% were primary-aged students (aged 7 to 11). The group was evenly split between boys and girls.

75% secondary-aged students

25% primary-aged students



Understanding and exploring experiences in mainstream education

We begin this report by listening to young people's reflections on the challenges they encountered in mainstream education.

Understanding these experiences helps us learn about alternative provisions, while recognising that every story is unique and shaped by individual circumstances.

While many shared difficulties, their voices also include positive reflections and valuable insights. These perspectives offer opportunities to build more inclusive, supportive, and responsive educational environments where every learner can thrive.





Understanding of needs

From the outset, several young people across different settings highlighted a perceived lack of understanding from school staff around their specific needs. These needs ranged from SEND and mental health challenges to simply wanting to be understood as a human being. Young people felt this was made more difficult by the high numbers of students in classrooms and corridors, especially in secondary schools, which made it increasingly difficult for staff to fully understand individual needs.



Bullying

The number of students in schools was the most common reason given for why young people felt unable to access mainstream education. Another contributing factor was the social pressure from peers to behave in certain ways. When this didn't happen, we heard some shocking examples of bullying. Bullying was a key reason why some young people felt they couldn't continue in mainstream education. Several expressed frustrations that incidents weren't dealt with early enough, allowing them to snowball and become so overwhelming that attending school became unmanageable.



Exam pressure

It also became clear early on that many young people felt mainstream education was too competitive or intense. There were strong views about the pressure of exams, particularly in secondary schools, and a sense that more value was placed on achieving the 'right results' than on developing young people for the future.



"Some schools can destroy our natural motivation because it becomes all about results."

Girl, 15

Motivation was a hot topic in these settings too and will be explored further in the report. In mainstream settings, some young people felt that personal motivation wasn't supported or nurtured, and in some cases, was actually harmed by the way schools approached learning. When the focus shifted more towards results, they felt their well-being needs were sometimes overlooked. Young people attributed this to adults seeming **"too busy or rushed to reach results."**

They also felt that a school's reputation often took priority, especially when linked to exam outcomes. Despite this, many young people expressed sympathy for school staff, recognising that they were **"under too much pressure."**

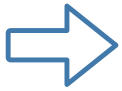
> **"A lot of us actually do just want to learn but it's the things they have in place that stop us."**
>
> Boy, 13



Impact of Covid

The long-lasting impact of Covid was also raised by many individuals we spoke with, some sharing harrowing accounts of its effect on their families or themselves. They felt this impact hadn't been fully acknowledged within education. For some, they had been able to access school before, but the knock-on effect of Covid was simply too great, and they hoped this wouldn't stigmatise them moving forward.

On the theme of isolation during Covid, young people were very clear: isolation units used in response to behaviour concerns just don't work. We heard deeply negative examples of how time spent in these units had completely broken any relationship they felt they had with the school, leaving them with no desire to return.



Move from primary to secondary

We found that communication between primary and secondary schools was sometimes poor, which meant that certain needs or adjustments weren't being put in place. For some, the move from a small primary setting to a much larger secondary school was a huge leap. They felt that with more continuity between the two, they might have been able to remain in secondary education.

Young people also shared that the approaches and expectations between primary and secondary were so different that the adjustment was simply too difficult. While some appreciated the need for a **'step up'** when transitioning to secondary school, they emphasised that **"everyone develops at a different rate"**, and that this needs to be considered.



Reputation

Reputation is something we've already highlighted above, but it came up again - this time in relation to young people's own reputations. We spoke with young people who had been excluded or moved to different settings, and while this was often described as a **'fresh start'**, some received negative comments from staff, or at least felt they were being judged on past mistakes.

Young people shared that this kind of experience created a vicious cycle, leaving them feeling like **"what's the point in trying."**

> **"Staff can sometimes judge you on your past and I don't think that's fair. Adults make mistakes too."**
>
> Girl, 12



Sadly, we spoke with one young girl who said, **“Some schools didn’t think I was worth their time.”** She was preparing to leave education. Having been involved with drugs at a young age, she acknowledged that consequences and rehabilitation were necessary at the time. However, even after proving herself, she felt that some still saw her as too much of a ‘risk’.

This experience wasn’t isolated, similar views were echoed across other settings we visited.



School holidays

Another common theme was the lack of support after returning from the six-week holidays. We heard several examples where placements broke down because, in the young person’s view, not enough was done to acknowledge the change in return or to understand any summer experiences that may have impacted them.



Traditional school day

Many young people also criticised the format of the traditional school day, saying it was too long and that lessons weren’t staggered with enough breaks. They felt that understanding the different attention spans of young people, especially those with SEND, was key to making the school day more manageable and inclusive.



Post 16 offer

Some young people we spoke with said they had switched off from education in their previous setting due to a lack of post-16 offer. As they approached the later years of school, many found it difficult to understand where the learning was leading. This wasn’t just about motivation - it was also about needing clarity and reassurance about life beyond school, rather than having everything pinned on exam results.

Some of the younger children we spoke with felt that primary schools didn’t prepare them enough for the future. They shared that having a clear pathway was just as important in the early years as it is when transitioning to secondary school.



Girls and peer pressure

What girls highlighted most was peer pressure. While bullying was a hot topic across both genders (as covered earlier), girls identified peer pressure as a key reason why mainstream education felt inaccessible. Many used the word ‘traumatised’ to describe how early issues weren’t dealt with, and when there was no early intervention or support, their relationship with school broke down.

A lot of young girls also shared that they were often labelled as ‘the quiet ones’ in school. Their message was clear: don’t miss the quiet ones, they can be struggling just as much as those who show it more openly.



“It can be so lonely in school when you don’t fit into a certain criteria.”

Girl, 15

What young people value in alternative provisions

When we spoke with young people, we didn't just look at the big picture—we also spent time talking about what's happening right now. We wanted to understand what their current provisions are giving them and what really matters to them day-to-day.



Flexibility

What stood out clearly from the start was their ability to be flexible.

Flexibility took many different forms, including start and finish times, adaptations to lesson plans, and adjusted expectations. Particularly popular was the ability to offer different start, break, and finish times based on individual circumstances, as well as responding to needs in the moment, when support was most needed.

Other services

Many young people said that on joining an alternative provision, they also had the opportunity to work with other services. Interestingly, across the different provisions, the **Wilderness Foundation** was mentioned several times as having a positive impact. Young people spoke about how being able to access services like this was beneficial, whereas in the past they had not been able to.

Therapy animals

In the different provisions we visited, therapy animals were also a common sight. Young people spoke about the calm, reassurance, and safety these animals could offer to individuals.

Personal support

Individual learning opportunities were also a big hit in most of the provisions we visited. Some young people felt they were engaging much better with education because they were offered more personal support.

Trust

Within those individual learning spaces, a big theme of our conversations centred around the fact that young people felt they could **trust** the adults. Staff approaches were crucial in helping young people feel the provision was right for them. They spoke about staff **"looking like they wanted to be there"** and **"staff actually getting on with each other"** - both aspects they felt were important in creating the right environment.

> **"They actually care here. I know that because they tell me and they show me."**
>
> Boy, 9



Approaches to learning

The approaches to learning were also highlighted as a strength across different alternative provisions. For example, having the opportunity to type rather than write, or being able to learn in more practical ways, felt more in line with how young people believed they could make progress.

Interests and aspirations

Linked to this was how the provisions adapted learning to their interests. Motivation is something we spoke about during Part 1, but across these provisions young people showed a real appetite to learn because they felt it was clearly linked to the aspirations they had.

> **"APs only work really if you have the right mindset yourself. Staff help that because they talk on your level and show their own emotions."**
>
> Boy, 15

Wellbeing

Wellbeing spaces were another key feature across the provisions we visited. Many young people spoke about how having these areas clearly defined enabled them to access their education. In addition, many felt this was something that previously hadn't been available, or was restricted at certain times. As one young girl told us:

> **"You can't decide when you start to feel unwell, so it doesn't make sense to have spaces that can only be used at certain times - you might as well not have the spaces at all."**
>
> Girl

What young people said worked was that time was given to focus on wellbeing, it didn't feel rushed, and staff understood that you needed to be in the right place to learn.

Balanced curriculum

In some of the provisions, young people accessed the provision as part of an enriched education offer and still attended their mainstream schools at different points. These groups spoke about how the alternative provision gave them a break from what was a busy or competitive environment, and because they had this opportunity, their attendance had improved.

Reputation

Many young people said they wanted the Alternative Provision to work, and it was working, because it would look better on their record. There was certainly a common theme here, both in Part 1 and Part 2, about how young people wanted to be perceived. They found reassurance in alternative provision but also wanted it to be viewed positively rather than negatively.

> **"We aren't here because we are naughty kids, and I think that's really important for others to understand."**
>
> Girl, 14

Belonging

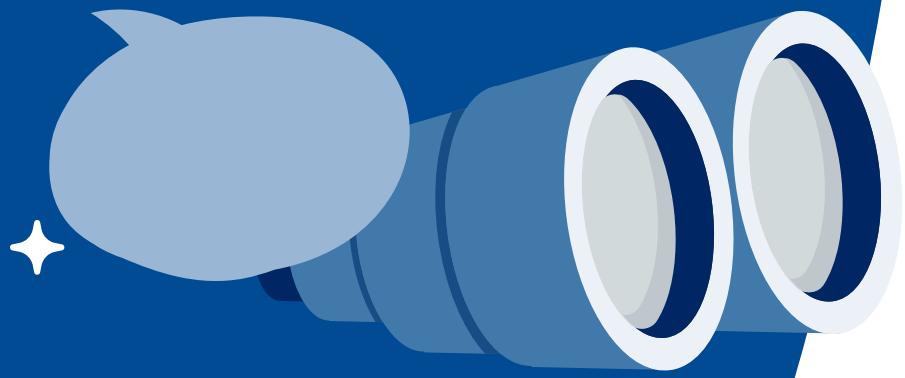
The final aspect covered during our visits links to a sense of belonging. Young people felt this was achieved because they were around other young people just **'like them'**. In alternative provisions, young people understood that everyone attending had their own reasons or stories, and this gave them comfort, reassurance, and confidence that they were not alone.

Young people's recommendations

So, what can we learn from the young people's experiences and accounts?

Most young people told us that being in an Alternative Provision (AP) felt better than returning to mainstream education. However, there were things they missed, including making friends, attending events such as prom, and feeling confident about how AP would be viewed in the future. Some felt sad that mainstream education had not worked out for them and believed that changes could make it easier for more young people to remain in, or return to, mainstream settings.

The recommendations that follow were shaped directly by young people through the MSC co-production approach. They reflect what matters most to them, not just as ideas, but as lived experiences and hopes for change. While we recognise that some recommendations may be more achievable than others, and that not all changes will be within the influence of individual schools, settings or services, we have chosen to present all the young people's ideas. We hope they will spark reflection, discussion and action across the system.



1 Strengthen Staff Understanding of SEND

Many young people had additional needs, and they felt staff training didn't always prepare teachers to support them effectively. Improving SEND content in initial teacher training and providing regular, high-quality CPD can make a real difference.

2 Prioritise Time to Understand the Individual

Young people want adults in education to see beyond the surface. They suggested creating protected time or increasing capacity in pastoral and wellbeing teams so staff can build relationships and understand deeper issues.

3 Address Overcrowding and Space Pressures

Busy classrooms and corridors were overwhelming for many. Ideas included reducing class sizes, expanding school spaces, and creating quieter areas for flexible learning. These changes may need investment—but young people believe they're essential.

4 Strengthen Anti-Bullying and Social Pressure Interventions

Bullying and peer pressure remain major barriers, especially for girls and neurodivergent students. Young people want stronger, more inclusive strategies—both in-person and online—to tackle these issues early and effectively.

5 Rebalance Priorities in Education

Young people felt the pressure to achieve often overshadowed wellbeing. Our task is to find a better balance between academic outcomes and emotional development.

6 Improve Understanding of Medical Needs and Post-Covid Impact

The long-term effects of Covid—on mental and physical health—are still being felt. Young people want schools to recognise and respond to these needs more proactively.

7 Rethink Isolation Units

Isolation was described as damaging and exclusionary. Young people want restorative, inclusive alternatives that rebuild relationships rather than break them.

8 Strengthen Transition Support Between Primary and Secondary

Moving from primary to secondary can feel like a huge leap. Better data sharing, earlier intervention, and joined-up planning could make this transition smoother and less overwhelming.

9 Rethink School Structure to Support Access

The traditional school day and long summer break don't work for everyone. Young people suggested exploring shorter days, flexible timetables, and even changes to holiday formats.

10 Support Motivation Through Personalised Approaches

Alternative provisions work because they make learning feel relevant and engaging. Mainstream schools could adopt more personalised approaches to keep motivation high.

11 Strengthen Links Between Learning and Future Goals

Young people want to see how education connects to their future—not just exams. Developing clearer pathways and alternative ways to assess progress could help.

12 Prioritise Belonging Across All Settings

Belonging came through as a powerful theme. Every setting should foster a sense of inclusion and community—because when young people feel they belong, they thrive.

Next step: responses from schools and leaders

Missing Voices was created by young people to share their experiences and recommendations for change.

We now invite schools, settings, services and leaders to reflect on what they have heard and respond to the recommendations in this publication.

In discussion with young people, we encourage you to consider:

- What are we doing well?
- What could we change?
- What will we do next?

We welcome responses that share your reflections, actions and examples of good practice. These responses will be shared with the young people who co-produced this publication and will help shape the next stage of the Multi-Schools Council cycle.

Together, we can move from listening to action and turn young people's voices into meaningful change.

Every voice matters.
Every change counts.



Thank you for reading our report.

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Essex County Council

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