



Perspectives of Young People at Diverse Youth NI on the Strategic Review of Current SEN Provision and the SEN Reform Agenda (2025–2030)

At Diverse Youth NI, we work with young people from diverse backgrounds, including migrants, ethnic minorities, refugees, and asylum seekers. Many of these young people face barriers in education that go beyond learning needs alone — shaped by language, migration status, trauma, and cultural stigma. The ongoing Strategic Review of SEN Provision and the SEN Reform Agenda (2025–2030) presents an important opportunity to make Northern Ireland’s education system more equitable and inclusive for all.

Key points from our young people’s perspective:

1. Representation and Language

Young people from migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds often find it difficult to access SEN assessments and support because of language barriers. Many families are not aware of how to seek help, and interpreter support is not easily available.

Our young people have highlighted that teachers sometimes confuse language acquisition difficulties with learning needs or overlook SEN because communication challenges are assumed to be “just an English issue.”

We believe schools should receive clearer guidance and mandatory training on how to assess pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and ensure interpreter support for parents at all stages of the SEN process.

2. Inclusion and Belonging

Some pupils with SEN who are also from minority or refugee backgrounds feel isolated or misunderstood within mainstream classrooms. Young people shared that experiences of racism or cultural misunderstanding can make schools feel unwelcoming, even when support plans are in place. They feel that inclusion is more than physical placement — it requires teachers and classroom assistants who understand cultural difference, address prejudice, and build relationships based on trust and empathy.

3. Intersectional Understanding

Our young people note that the SEN Reform Agenda often treats special needs as a separate issue, without recognising the compounded barriers faced by those who are migrants, newly arrived, or recovering from trauma.

For example, refugee pupils who have experienced displacement or conflict may struggle with concentration, emotional regulation, or anxiety. Yet there are no trauma-informed pathways built into current SEN assessment or support processes.

4. Data and Accountability

The Outcomes Framework (June 2025) includes a Data Development Agenda to track “gaps between children and young people with SEN/D and all other children and young people.” However, it does not propose collecting or reporting data by **ethnicity, language background, or migration status**.

Young people view this as a serious gap. Without disaggregated data, it is impossible to identify whether certain communities are being left behind or to measure progress in tackling inequality.

5. Systemic Inclusion and Partnerships

Currently, there are no specific actions within the SEN Reform Agenda to address barriers for ethnic minority, asylum-seeker, or refugee young people. Young people believe that schools and the Education Authority should work more closely with **community-based and minority-led organisations**, who have established trust and can help bridge gaps between families and schools. They also want to see co-design forums where parents and young people from diverse backgrounds can share lived experiences and help shape policy and practice.

Potential Concerns:

Young people are concerned that reforms may focus heavily on process and structure but not enough on real inclusion. They worry that:

- Cultural and linguistic factors will continue to be overlooked in SEN assessments.
- Schools may lack capacity or willingness to implement culturally competent approaches without clear expectations or oversight.
- Without data disaggregation, inequalities affecting minority learners will remain invisible.

Recommendations from young people at Diverse Youth NI:

- **Add an Equality and Diversity lens** to SEN reforms, recognising the intersection of SEN with ethnicity, language, trauma, and migration.
- **Disaggregate data** in SEN monitoring and outcomes frameworks by ethnicity, language background, and migration status.
- **Train staff** in culturally competent SEN assessment, communication, and trauma-informed practice.
- **Integrate policies:** Align the SEN Reform Agenda with the Race Equality Strategy and the Newcomer Education Framework.
- **Engage communities:** Establish co-design forums and lived-experience panels including ethnic minority parents, youth, and community advocates.

Conclusion:

Young people at Diverse Youth NI welcome the SEN Reform Agenda as a chance to improve fairness and support for all learners. However, they stress that equality cannot be achieved without recognising the intersectional barriers faced by ethnic minority, refugee, and asylum-seeker youth.

By embedding cultural competence, disaggregating data, and involving diverse communities in policy design, Northern Ireland can move towards a truly inclusive education system that meets every child's needs — academically, emotionally, and socially.