

Agenda Alliance's response to the Department for Education's consultation on SEND reform: putting children and young people first

May 2026

About Agenda Alliance

[Agenda Alliance](#) exists to make a difference to the lives of women and girls who are at the sharpest end of inequality. We are an alliance of over [130 member organisations](#) – from large, national bodies to smaller, specialist organisations – working in collaboration to influence public policy and practice to respond appropriately to women and girls with multiple unmet needs.

Our work aims to evidence and change the cycle of harm experienced by women when the root causes of their disadvantage are left unaddressed. For many, this begins in school. Our five-year strategy includes a focus on reducing the numbers of official and unofficial exclusions of girls and young women – considering the structural reasons behind exclusions, as well as the impact of a lack of support for those with multiple unmet needs.

Whilst significant gaps in the evidence-base remain, early findings from our work on [girls' school exclusions](#) suggest that girls with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who experience exclusion from education are 'flying under the radar' – with a lack of focus on their needs in policy and practice and limited access to specialist, gender-responsive support. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and, within this submission, focus specifically on the needs of girls at risk of being absent, suspended or excluded from education, centring those with SEND.

Q1. We want children, young people and their families to be involved in making better, evidence-based decisions about SEND, both in their local area and across the country. How can we make sure children, young people and their families have a genuine say in these decisions?

We welcome a commitment to involving children, young people and their families in decision-making about SEND, both in their local areas and across the country. However, our work on girls and young women to date has found that policies, strategies and funding streams consistently fail to recognise the needs and experiences of girls and young women as being distinct from those of boys and young men. Through our work on issues affecting girls and young women more broadly, we have developed an understanding of what effective approaches to engaging girls and young women with lived experience in decision-making processes looks like – and the consequences of not doing so.

A gendered lens – When statutory services assume so-called “gender-neutral” approaches, this can inadvertently lead to the specific, gendered needs of girls being overlooked.¹ In the UK, whilst boys have historically accounted for a larger proportion of SEND students, the number of girls with SEND is rising – almost 2 in 5 students with SEN support are now girls.² Despite this, girls continue to be overlooked in policy and practice. In the recently published Schools White Paper, girls are only referenced three times – with only one of these references focusing on tailored support for girls.³ At the same time, we continue to see growing rates of girls’ absence and exclusion from school⁴ but there remains limited research and focus on the link between girls’ unmet needs relating to SEND and their official and unofficial exclusion from education. Overlooked in research and data, girls also have limited opportunities to make their voices heard in policy development.

Seeking girls’ perspectives – Girls’ and young women’s lived experience and perspectives should be embedded into the development of programmes intended to support them. In our own co-production work, we have identified three pillars of good practice when working with women and girls with lived experience. The involvement of girls and young women in decision-making should be:

- responsible – conducted in a trauma-informed way that is responsive to a girls’ age, gender, experiences of trauma, cultural background, and supports appropriate safeguarding;
- reciprocal – ensuring girls and young women are compensated for their time and derive clear benefits from their involvement;
- intentional – ensuring activities are accessible and work to disrupt unequal power-dynamics between decision-makers and girls and young women whose insights and expertise are being sought.⁵

Effective co-production should also involve feedback loops that allow for multiple forms and points of engagement. Co-production processes should also ensure transparency so that participants are aware of their role in decision-making and how their input is being used and shared.

1. Agenda Alliance (2022) [Pushed Out, Left Out – Girls Speak: Final report.](#)

2. Department for Education (2025) [Special educational needs in England](#)

3. Department for Education (2026) [Every child achieving and thriving](#)

4. In 2024/25, severe absences for girls reached record levels, with 2.43% of girls severely absent. Agenda Alliance (2026) [The number of girls severely absent from school reaches record levels.](#) The most recent annual government data shows that girls’ exclusions and suspensions are also at a record high, with 0.08% of girls being excluded in 2023/24, and 8.58% suspended. Department for Education (2025) [Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England](#)

5. Agenda Alliance [Co-production Guide](#)

An intersectional approach – It is also vital that girls’ and young women’s involvement in decision-making is intersectional. Our research into the experiences of girls and young women in education settings has shown that intersecting identities, including race, ethnicity, faith, sexual orientation, and gender identity, can compound the disadvantages that girls face, including those related to SEND.⁶ Taking an intersectional approach requires meaningful engagement with girls and young women with varied lived experiences and providing safe mechanisms for engagement that are accessible and trauma-, culture-, gender- and neurodivergence-responsive.

Girls not in school – The Schools White Paper proposes relocating responsibility for the provision of Individual Support Plans from Local Authorities to schools. As no mechanisms for support and accountability for girls and young women not in school have been outlined, we are concerned they may be overlooked in the provision of SEND support. This includes girls in Secure Training Centres and young women in the women’s prison estate. To ensure that the voices of these girls and young women are not excluded from decision-making, it is essential that the Department for Education also engages specifically with girls and young women who are not currently in school settings.

Recommendations

We believe that women and girls have a right to be heard and have a genuine say in decisions that affect their lives. Our evidence suggests that this is not currently happening for girls with SEND. To ensure that girls and young women’s needs do not continue to be overlooked in decision-making:

1. Girls and young women must be meaningfully involved in both local and national decision-making around education policy and SEND, so decision-makers can better understand their experiences, and so girls and young women can help shape solutions.
2. The Department for Education must draw on principles of co-production in their approach to engagement regarding SEND, ensuring that girls and young women with a diverse range of lived experience are afforded real opportunities to shape the decisions that affect their lives and access to education.

6. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls Speak: Girls at Risk of Exclusion](#)

Q2. How can we make sure that high-quality evidence and best practice inform decisions about SEND? Please share examples

Our research shows that girls' experiences of education are directly impacted by specific, gendered harms; yet these experiences are often missing from the evidence-base.⁷ For girls with SEND, who we know often present differently to boys,⁸ this means that their gendered needs cannot be meaningfully met, and they report worse experiences across a range of educational contexts and lower feelings of belonging to their schools than girls without SEND.⁹ Limited research around the gendered experiences of SEND and gaps in data (such as the lack of data disaggregated by SEND status, gender, ethnicity and experiences of care), act as significant barriers to effective decision-making and the development of appropriate support for girls and young women with SEND. Change can be made through adopting an intersectional, gendered approach to data collection, research and evidence.

Gender and SEND identification – Whilst data gaps affect all students, we know that girls' experiences of SEND have been particularly invisibilised in the evidence-base. Girls have been consistently under-represented in disability identification – impacted by professional biases throughout the identification and referral processes, as well as by diagnostic criteria developed from research predominantly based on boys and men.¹⁰ For example, girls with autism have been found to frequently fly under the radar, typically being diagnosed six years later than boys with autism and receiving less support to meet their needs.¹¹ Similarly, identification of ADHD has typically been based on externalised behaviour – overlooking girls' tendencies to mask and internalise ADHD behaviours.¹²

7. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls Speak: Girls at Risk of Exclusion](#)

8. Diagnostic criteria have been developed from research predominantly focused on boys and men. This combined with the fact that girls are more likely to mask and internalise their behaviours related to autism and ADHD can result in girls being overlooked. [Autism and Girls: How autistic girls present differently](#), Autistic Girls Network; Porter and Ingram (2021) [Changing the exclusionary practices of mainstream secondary schools: the experience of girls with SEND. 'I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world'](#)

9. Porter and Ingram (2021) [Changing the exclusionary practices of mainstream secondary schools: the experience of girls with SEND. 'I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world'](#)

10. Daniel and Wang (2023) [Gender differences in special educational needs identification; Autism and Girls: How autistic girls present differently](#), Autistic Girls Network

11. Sanderson (2023) [Hiding in plain sight – underdiagnoses of girls with SEN](#), Options Autism; [Autism and Girls: How autistic girls present differently](#), Autistic Girls Network

12. Porter and Ingram (2021) [Changing the exclusionary practices of mainstream secondary schools: the experience of girls with SEND. 'I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world'](#)

Compounding discrepancies in SEND identification, research shows that absenteeism results in students' SEND needs not being identified due to them not being present in the classroom.¹³ Girls are disproportionately impacted by both persistent and severe absenteeism, furthering their invisibilisation in practice and provision in response to SEND.¹⁴ Developing best practice related to SEND therefore requires more effectively identifying and responding to the needs of girls and young women, including girls who are persistently or severely absent from school.

Disaggregated data – As a standalone category, SEND data is often disaggregated by characteristics such as gender and ethnicity, meaning we can identify, for example, how many girls from different ethnic backgrounds have SEND. Similarly, absenteeism, exclusions and suspensions data is commonly disaggregated by SEND status, allowing us to see that children and young people with SEND are disproportionately affected by absence and exclusion compared with their peers without SEND. However, these datasets are not routinely connected in ways that allow for intersectional analysis. For example, whilst our analysis of Department for Education data has identified that girls are disproportionately affected by persistent and severe absence,¹⁵ current data collection does not enable us to identify how many girls with SEND specifically are absent from school. This lack of joined-up, disaggregated data creates significant gaps in the evidence base and limits the development of effective policy and practice for girls most at risk of going missing from the classroom.

Ethnic disproportionalities – Girls' ethnicities also impact their experience of SEND identification and access to support. Asian girls are particularly underrepresented across the various SEND categories which may suggest that criteria for identification do not effectively capture their experiences and needs.¹⁶ In contrast to this invisibilisation, other ethnic groups of girls are disproportionately represented in SEND data. Data from the Department for Education shows that girls of Black Caribbean, mixed White and Black Caribbean, Gypsy Roma, Irish Traveller and Irish heritage all have higher than average rates of SEN-support and EHCPs.¹⁷ Whilst research on the factors contributing to this is limited, the disproportionate representation of Black Caribbean and mixed heritage White and Caribbean students with SEND has been linked to poverty and "unwarranted over-identification of social, emotional and mental health needs".¹⁸

14. Agenda Alliance (2026) [The number of girls severely absent from school reaches record levels](#)

15. Agenda Alliance (2026) [The number of girls severely absent from school reaches record levels](#)

16. Strand and Lindorff (2018) [Ethnic disproportionality in the identification of special educational needs \(SEN\) in England: Extent, causes and consequences](#)

17. Department for Education (2025) [Special educational needs in England](#)

18. University of Oxford Department of Education (2019) [Ethnic minority children disproportionately identified with Special Education Needs \(SEN\)](#)

Girls from these same ethnic backgrounds also experience higher than average rates of absenteeism, exclusions and suspensions, pointing to gaps in the current system of support.¹⁹ However, as outlined above, exclusions and absenteeism data are not currently disaggregated in a way that allows analysis to encompass gender, ethnicity, SEND status and type of SEND need – limiting our ability to understand Black and minoritised girls’ experiences of exclusion from education and SEND.

Care-experienced girls – The lack of disaggregated data also invisibilises the experiences of care-experienced girls. In response to a 2026 Freedom of Information request, the Department of Education informed us that they do not collect data on school absenteeism and exclusions disaggregated by both gender and care status. Whilst around 70% of Looked After Children have some form of SEN,²⁰ the lack of disaggregated data means that decision-makers are unable to account for the specific gendered needs and experiences of care-experienced girls with SEND.

Informal exclusion – We are also concerned about the lack of comprehensive monitoring of other informal modes of school disengagement such as internal exclusion (isolation) and ‘managed moves’.²¹ Evidence suggests that girls are more likely to be informally excluded, and experience early exits and school moves.²² Students with SEND, particularly those with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, also disproportionately experience managed moves and unexplained school transfers.²³ Due to an absence of disaggregated data, it is unclear whether girls with SEND are being disproportionately impacted by these informal modes of exclusion. Ensuring a high-quality evidence-base and developing best practice around SEND, therefore, requires research into the gendered experiences of informal exclusions.

19. Agenda Alliance (2026) [The number of girls severely absent from school reaches record levels](#); Agenda Alliance (2024) [New figures show school exclusions for Black Caribbean girls are rising again](#)

20. Coram (2024) [Education for looked after children](#)

21. Managed moves are “transfers agreed between headteachers, parents and pupils for the pupil to move to a new school”. Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson (2024) [Unexplained school transfers and managed moves: Local protocols, practice and outcomes for pupils](#), The Education Policy Institute .

22. School change or a school move occurs when a pupil is moved between one mainstream schools to another, between school censuses. Research shows a significant overlap between pupils who ‘self-exclude’ through persistent absence, and pupils who experience a school move or fixed-term exclusions. Social Finance (2020) Who’s at risk of exclusion? [An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester](#). 6.1% of girls have experienced at least one unexplained transfer in secondary school, compared to 5.6% of boys, Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson (2024) [Unexplained school transfers and managed moves: Local protocols, practice and outcomes for pupils](#), The Education Policy Institute

23. Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson (2024) [Unexplained school transfers and managed moves: Local protocols, practice and outcomes for pupils](#), The Education Policy Institute

Engaging with girls and young women – Beyond collecting and publishing more comprehensive quantitative data and conducting comprehensive data analysis on a national and regional level, capturing examples of best practice will also require effective engagement with girls and young women, as outlined in our response to question 1, as well as with the service providers that support them.

Oversight and scrutiny – We welcome plans in the Schools White Paper for the Children’s Commissioner to provide oversight and scrutiny of SEND reform implementation, with a particular focus on children in care, children in need, children not in school, including those who have been excluded, intersectionality and those facing multiple disadvantages. Girls at the sharpest end of inequality often fall into these groups and, without effective monitoring and oversight of their specific experiences, risk continuing to fall through gaps in support. To account for this, we are keen to see plans for oversight and scrutiny to specifically include monitoring the effectiveness and impact of planned reforms for girls.

Recommendations

The Department for Education must adopt a gendered approach to tackling existing data gaps and building the evidence-base to inform decision-making about SEND. This should include:

1. Ensuring that all SEND exclusions, suspensions, and absenteeism data is also simultaneously disaggregated by gender and ethnicity, as well as experience of care, and type of SEND, to better capture the gendered and intersectional experiences and needs of girls with SEND who are missing from school.
2. Introducing monitoring of all instances of informal exclusions, including the experiences of girls with SEND on reduced timetables, isolation, off-rolling, and managed moves.

This must be underpinned by meaningful and effective engagement with girls and young women with SEND, as outlined in our response to question 1.

Q7. How do you think early years settings, schools, and college can best support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people?

Whilst more commonly associated with behavioural problems and preventing disruption in the classroom, girls and young women that Agenda Alliance has spoken to often attribute their exclusion from education to poor mental health.²⁴ Education settings need to take a gender-responsive approach to supporting girls’ and young women’s mental health and wellbeing. This must be trauma-informed and culturally-responsive.

24. Agenda Alliance (2022) [Pushed Out, Left Out – Girls Speak: Final report](#).

Barriers to support – For all children, mental wellbeing has a significant impact on educational engagement.²⁵ For girls and young women in particular, rates of poor mental health have risen sharply over the past decade.²⁶ Girls with probable mental health conditions report feeling less safe at school, less enjoyment in learning, having fewer trusted peers, and report accessing less helpful support from staff.²⁷ Growing rates of absenteeism amongst girls appear to be closely linked to mental health difficulties,²⁸ and many girls have told us that their exclusions from school were also linked to unaddressed mental health needs.²⁹

Girls’ mental wellbeing is deeply intertwined with SEND. In 2024/5, Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs were the largest category of SEN support need for girls, accounting for 22% of girls with SEN support.³⁰ Among suspended pupils, Social, Emotional and Mental Health need is the most common SEN category.³¹ Despite this, their mental health needs are often unidentified or are not addressed until a crisis point is reached.³² Schools report staff feeling ill-equipped to respond to complex mental health needs,³³ with research finding that pupils would benefit from additional support instead face suspension.³⁴ Our work on girls’ school exclusions has shown that girls may face additional barriers to accessing support, including a lack of understanding in education settings of some of the drivers of girls’ poor mental health, including trauma, abuse, and discrimination.³⁵

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- 25. Centre for Mental Health (2024) [Not in School: The Mental Health Barriers to School Attendance](#)
 - 26. In the context of a high and rising mental health crisis facing young people, girls and young women are the hardest hit. Young women experience the highest rates of common mental disorders like anxiety and depression – and as youth mental ill health has risen in recent years, girls and young women’s poor mental health has risen the fastest. At the sharpest end, while boys and young men are more likely to die by suicide, girls and young women experience the highest rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. Agenda Alliance and Centre for Young Lives (2026) [The role of philanthropy in addressing the girls’ and young women’s mental health crisis](#).
 - 27. NHS Digital (2023) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017](#)
 - 28. For every 1% more school missed the probability of a girl having mental ill health increases by 0.3%, ONS (2025) [Child mental ill health and absence from school, England: 2021 to 2022](#); Girls aged 8-16 with a ‘probable’ mental health condition are more than 5 times more likely to miss more than 15 days of school than girls ‘unlikely’ to have a mental health condition, NHS Digital (2023) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey](#).
 - 29. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls Speak: Girls at Risk of Exclusion](#)
 - 30. Department for Education (2025) [Special educational needs in England](#)
 - 31. Joseph et al. (2024) [Outcomes for young people who experience multiple suspensions](#), Education Policy Institute
 - 32. Joseph et al. (2024) [Outcomes for young people who experience multiple suspensions](#), Education Policy Institute
 - 33. Gill et al. (2017) [Making the Difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion \(IPPR\)](#)
 - 34. Joseph et al. (2024) [Outcomes for young people who experience multiple suspensions](#), Education Policy Institute; Children’s Commissioner (2020), [Far Less Than They Deserve](#)
 - 35. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls Speak: Girls at risk of exclusion](#).

Understanding the impact of trauma – Through our engagement with girls and young women, we know that girls’ mental health and wellbeing is often impacted by gendered experiences of harm, including experiences of gender-based violence and abuse.³⁶ The impact of trauma in response to these forms of harm can display as ‘disruptive’ behaviour, meaning that girls are often met with disciplinary responses, rather than support to address the root causes of the issue. Girls may also internalise their distress, meaning the challenges they face may go unnoticed and unsupported, leading to self-exclusion and worsening mental health.³⁷ An understanding of the impact of trauma is essential to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of girls and young women in education settings.

An intersectional approach – In comparison to their white peers, Black and minoritised girls have been found to receive less effective support in relation to their mental health and wellbeing.³⁸ With models of understanding and responding to mental health difficulties often failing to connect experiences of oppression with poor mental health,³⁹ responses to racism can also be mischaracterised as signs or symptoms of mental illness, resulting in the discrimination Black and minoritised girls face being left unaddressed.⁴⁰ As described in a recent report by [Milk Honey Bees](#) on the wellbeing of Black girls in London secondary schools, ‘when Black girls exhibit trauma-related symptoms like anger, guilt and low self-esteem, their behaviour tend to be punished, rather than being viewed as a response to underlying trauma’.⁴¹ Black and minoritised girls – especially Black girls – frequently experience this through a process of “adultification,” which can lead to professionals under-estimating girls’ vulnerability, attributing greater levels of maturity to girls than warranted by their age and downplaying their safeguarding responsibilities.⁴² A culturally-responsive approach to mental health in schools is necessary, to effectively challenge adultification and ensure that Black and minoritised girls struggling with mental health and wellbeing are offered appropriate support.

36. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls Speak: Girls at Risk of Exclusion](#)

37. IPPR (2017) [Making the Difference: Breaking the Link between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion](#)

38. Agenda Alliance (2020) [Struggling Alone: Girls’ and young women’s mental health.](#)

39. Fitzpatrick et al. (2014) [Ethnic Inequalities in Mental Health: Promoting Lasting Positive Change.](#) Lankelly Chase Foundation, Mind, The Afiya Trust and Centre for Mental Health.

40. Kalathil, J (2011) [Recovery and Resilience: African, African-Caribbean and South Asian Women’s experience of recovering from mental illness.](#) Mental Health Foundation and Survivor Research.

41. Morris-Jarra and Iyere (2025) [See us, Hear us: The Perceptions and Wellbeing of Black girls in London Secondary Schools,](#) Milk Honey Bees.

42. Jahnine Davis (2022) [Adultification bias of black children: Q&A with Jahnine Davis](#)

Specialist support for girls and young women – Specialist girls’ and young women’s services can play a critical role in engaging girls at risk of going missing from the classroom and improving their mental health and wellbeing. Offering effective, targeted and sustainable support for girls and young women struggling with their mental health and wellbeing requires partnership-building between schools and specialist organisations,⁴³ including access to dedicated girl-only spaces and wraparound support. Due to their advocacy and engagement with girls, specialist girls’ and young women’s services are also often best-placed to work with girls to develop creative, co-produced solutions to the challenges they face. Leeds-based organisation, Getaway Girls, recently co-produced an education charter that outlines specific steps for improving girls and young women’s experience of education, including identifying ways in which their mental health and wellbeing can be better supported in school.⁴⁴

Recommendations

As part of plans set out in the Schools White Paper to support disadvantaged children to achieve and thrive, the Department for Education should establish a specific strand of work for girls experiencing multiple unmet needs, including poor mental health, and ensure they have the support they need to stay in education. This work should:

1. Take a cross-departmental approach to tackling the drivers of girls’ exclusions and absenteeism, including mental ill-health and SEND.
2. Be developed in partnership with specialist girls’ and young women’s services and services led ‘by and for’ Black and minoritised groups.
3. Be co-produced with girls and young women with lived experience of exclusions and absenteeism as a result of mental ill-health and unmet needs relating to SEND, who are remunerated appropriately for their time.

43. Agenda Alliance (2021) [Girls Speak: Girls at risk of exclusion](#)

44. Getaway Girls (2026) [Thriving in Education: A charter for girls and young women](#)