

ETF and FE News Bridging the
SEND Transition Collective

Professor Amanda Kirby
and Dr Vikki Smith

EDUCATION
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**BEYOND
THE LABEL:
WORKFORCE,
TRANSITION AND
THE FUTURE OF
SEND REFORM**



ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

A collated report bringing together practical frontline insight and system-level priorities, with a clear emphasis on professional standards, evidence-informed practice, and workforce development as the route to sustainable inclusion.

The report focuses on:



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FOREWORD



Never has there been a more relevant time to discuss how further education (FE) and skills settings support people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The Government's 2026 Schools White Paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' places transition and inclusion at the heart of its vision for a reformed post-16 landscape and yet the gap between that policy ambition and lived experience remains stubbornly wide.

The Education Training Foundation (ETF) and FE News Bridging the SEND Transition Collective in London brought together practitioners, leaders, researchers and advocates from across the sector to do something more than reflect on the problem. Working across facilitated breakout sessions, participants mapped the current reality, articulated a shared direction, and agreed the practical priorities they want to put to policymakers as the White Paper consultation closes.

This report collates the outputs of the discussions on the day into one cohesive account. It is structured around the questions that framed the day: where are we now; where do we want to get to; and how do we close the gap. Discussions – on transition, lifelong learning and neuro-inclusion, and workforce development consistently reinforced each other. Together, they represent a coherent, sector-led position on what needs to change.

The discussions also reinforced a deeper point: inclusion is not a bolt-on function delivered by specialists alone, but a hallmark of professionalism across the whole FE and skills workforce.

The collective view

This was that SEND capability must become part of the sector's shared professional identity, supported through national standards, consistent high-quality development pathways, and a culture of continuous improvement. This has direct implications for how the system supports leaders, teachers, support staff and employers to work together, and for how national bodies can convene and quality assure the workforce development offer.

The challenge is real and current

The opportunity is equally real. The scale and complexity of the reform required should not be underestimated. The system is not facing a single operational challenge, but a whole-ecosystem shift involving education, health, local government, employers and communities. However, participants also emphasised that the opportunity is already present: the FE and skills sector have a distinctive strength in flexibility, creativity and responsiveness. If policy creates the conditions for collaboration and professional trust, the sector can innovate rapidly and sustainably.

As a sector, we have both the expertise and the responsibility to help shape what comes next.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The conclusions from the FE News Bridging the SEND Transition Collective produced a clear, converging message: the system is not yet built around the needs of learners with SEND.

Across transition planning, assessment, educator capability and workforce development, participants identified structural gaps that policy and practice must address together.

Participants consistently returned to the reality that many learners arrive in post-16 education carrying evidence of their challenging earlier educational experiences, including exclusion, repeated failure, or unmet needs.

This makes transition not only an administrative process but an emotional, relational, and practical one.

The collective view was that workforce development must therefore be grounded in understanding the intersection of trauma-informed practice and neurodiverse cognitive profiles of strengths and challenges, as the impact is additive.

Utilising universal design principles as a starting point ensures that inclusive education is designed for everyone, rather than treated as specialist provision for a minority.

The ten headline findings

1. Transition is a lifelong skill, not a single event. Current practice treats transition as a point in time; it should be built into everything.
2. FE and skills providers are still guessing, not anticipating. Poor information sharing means colleges begin each relationship reactively.
3. Assessment must become needs-led and non-diagnostic. Support should be triggered by what a learner needs, not by what the system has labelled them. However, the system still requires consistent ways to define and prioritise levels of need, particularly where needs are urgent or complex.
4. Educator development must be a continuous, lifelong professional cycle which is sustained and embedded, and not episodic. Training that happens once and disappears does not change practice. This requires a national approach to quality-assured professional development that is scalable, post-16 specific, and accessible for all roles, including teachers, support staff and leaders.
5. Inclusive practices are cultural and are not a service. It requires community-wide ownership: families, carers, employers, and learners themselves.

6. Education should be a motorway with different lanes, accepting that we move at different speeds to get to our different destinations and not a cul-de-sac. Assessments are the service stations along the journey, and never the destination.

7. GCSE and Level 2 resit requirements are blocking progression, and rigid English and maths attainment reduce access for some to skills training. Functional capability and examination performance are not the same thing.

8. Funding architecture is creating barriers. Administrative layers between resource and learner can make it harder to respond quickly, meaning opportunities are sometimes missed.

9. The employer gap is unresolved. The FE and skills sector has developed real expertise in understanding the delivery of support and intervention approaches for SEND; most employers have not, and handover fails as a result.

10. Technology must reduce the administrative load, not create it. The goal is more educator time with learners, not less.

ANTICIPATING LEARNER NEEDS THROUGH TRANSITION



The context

Effective, timely and person-centred transition is widely recognised as key to both long-term and sustained success for people with SEND. The Government's 2026 Schools White Paper explicitly identifies transition between settings as a pivotal moment in a person's journey, and calls for more effective, timely and impactful approaches across all educational settings and into adulthood.

Solution-focused professionals from across practice were able to identify the challenges – and, critically, to ask: what could this look like, and what could we do differently?

Where we are now: the challenges

Challenges were readily identified because of the depth of expertise in the room.

Six areas emerged consistently:

Theme	Challenge	Opportunity
Information sharing	Not timely or robust between settings	Digitalised, consistent, accessible records
Stakeholder expectations	Confused and inconsistent across the system	Co-designed transitions with young people and families
Parental guidance	Impartial information is lacking	Gold standard criteria for transition, widely shared
Systems connectivity	Lack of interconnectivity across processes	Shared digital infrastructure following the learner
Lifelong framing	Transition treated as a one-off event	Transition recognised as a lifelong journey
Employer readiness	Sector understands SEND; employers largely do not	Inclusive framework for the education-to-work transition

A candid observation from the Collective: because of these challenges, FE and skills settings are very often not anticipating learner needs during transition (despite knowing when transitions will occur), they are guessing, until the picture of the young person becomes clearer. This is not a failure of individual practitioners; it is a structural problem that leaves learners exposed at exactly the moment they are most vulnerable. This can lead to loss of confidence, attendance and ultimately attainment.

The Collective also noted that transition is often the most fragile point in the learner journey, not because of a lack of goodwill, but because of the complexity of the system. Too many organisations, funding mechanisms and casework processes converge at once, increasing anxiety for families and creating confusion about accountability. Participants felt strongly that transition planning needs to begin earlier (as early as Year 9 in some cases), particularly for learners likely to require supported pathways into FE, apprenticeships or supported employment.



Where we want to get to: the art of the possible

Discussion moving away from narrow diagnosis to aspiration was a positive way to identify what a genuinely excellent transition system could look like:

- clear responsibility and accountability at every stage, in every setting
- transition co-designed with young people and their parents or caregivers
- a 'gold standard' framework for effective transition, nationally recognised with fixed time points for review
- digitalised, consistent, accessible information that travels with the learner, so repetition is reduced
- transition understood as a lifelong journey – into work and beyond
- transition planning moved to Year 10 rather than Year 11, to increase impact and provide time for preparation
- specialist transition pathways designed for FE and skills, recognising that approaches effective in schools do not always translate to post-16 settings.



FE and skills environments understand the needs of students with SEND well, but more work is needed nationally through the policy lens to help employers bridge the gap between education and work settings.



Implications for FE and skills providers

While many of the structural reforms required sit with government and system partners, the Collective also recognised that providers can act now. The strongest immediate impact will come from embedding universal design principles across teaching and support, investing in whole-organisation workforce development, strengthening employer partnerships, and building structured, reflective practice through communities of practice. Inclusion will be sustained where it is treated not as a project, but as a core professional and organisational discipline.

The ask

The development of an inclusive, confident framework that establishes a clear national process for transitioning into and around the workplace.

The challenge is immediate – the White Paper consultation is closing – but the opportunity to shape national SEND policy is both a real opportunity and a privilege.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND NEURO-INCLUSION

The context

Effective, timely and person-centred transition is widely recognised as key to both long-term and sustained success for people with SEND. The Government's 2026 Schools White Paper explicitly identifies transition between settings as a pivotal moment in a person's journey, and calls for more effective, timely and impactful approaches across all educational settings and into adulthood.

Solution-focused professionals from across practice were able to identify the challenges – and, critically, to ask: what could this look like, and what could we do differently?

Where we are now

- The current system relies too heavily on examinations to evidence what a learner knows. This approach does not always assess the right things, nor does it assess them well.
- There is too narrow a focus on cognitive capability, at the expense of other strengths and forms of intelligence.
- Funding concentrates on post-19, giving learners little scope to take a break and return to education later in life.
- Funding pots restrict what educators can actually do, even when their intent is genuinely supportive of the learner.
- Standardised assessment frameworks serve a production logic; they do not serve the story of an individual learner or support them across a lifelong journey.

At its worst, the Collective observed, the system can feel overly procedural and inflexible, unable to adapt to the needs of the individual in front of it.

Participants also raised the issue of the post-18 and post-25 “cliff edge”, where support reduces sharply despite the reality that need does not end at an age threshold.

The Collective challenged the prevailing medical model framing of SEND, noting that the system often incentivises diagnosis as the route to support.

A shift towards a social and needs-based model was seen as essential, alongside a stronger strengths-based narrative that helps learners recognise their capabilities rather than internalise deficits.

Participants argued that the system remains overly focused on examinations, results and credentialism, rather than on learning. This creates a reductive definition of success and can undermine learner confidence, curiosity and motivation.

A recurring theme was that education should re-centre the love of learning, including creativity, relationships, confidence and personal growth, as outcomes in their own right, not merely as by-products of qualification achievement.

Where we want to get to

A powerful reframing emerged: educators are not dealers in hope (to borrow Napoleon's phrase about leaders). They are, more accurately, the midwives of hope. Without hope, none of this work can be effective.

Several destinations were identified:

- assessment that genuinely reflects the skills employers need: the ability to interact with others, to process information from many sources, to manage and improve a process
- assessment better fitted to a changing economic landscape, including AI-relevant capabilities that everyone will need
- recognition that performing to an assessment is not the same as understanding well enough to apply knowledge in a real, changing workplace situation
- a curriculum and assessment system that values creativity, confidence, employability and relationships alongside attainment
- an education system that prepares young people to become citizens, not simply candidates for examinations
- a stronger understanding of the psychology of learning, including how creativity, motivation, belonging and emotional safety shape engagement and progress for learners with SEND.



Education should not be a cul-de-sac with an examination as its destination. It should be more like a motorway, where assessment is a service station along the way, and the focus is always the whole journey of the person.

The Collective also cautioned against an overly narrow policy narrative that defines success only as rapid entry into employment. While work matters, inclusion and equity of access must also be understood in terms of long-term societal outcomes: reduced exclusion, improved health and wellbeing, stronger communities, and greater independence. Participants argued that SEND reform should therefore be evaluated through its downstream impact on lives and society, not only immediate labour market outcomes.

The Collective urged policymakers to recognise the full scale of the challenge. SEND reform cannot succeed through isolated initiatives or school-led solutions alone. The system must be designed around whole-life journeys, including adult education, employment transitions, local authority capability, and the capacity of the FE and skills workforce. Without a realistic whole-system lens, the sector risks repeating the same conversations in five years' time.



How we close the gap

Three areas of action were identified:

1. Treat transition as a skill, not a destination

Transition is often framed as a distinct point in time. The Collective pushed back: supporting learners to cope with transition as an ongoing skill they use throughout life is far more valuable.

2. Trusted, empowered educators

Level 2 / GCSE maths and English were discussed at length. The Collective felt that resit requirements hold people back from areas where they would thrive, simply because they cannot pass examinations placed in front of them, even where their functional capability is more than sufficient.

Educators should be trusted and held accountable for making contextual judgements. The key principle: an educator must be able to make a call, take responsibility for it, and be supported to do so.

3. Move resources to the front line

Drawing on a military analogy, the facilitator offered the sharpest structural observation of the day: move as many resources as possible as close as possible to the front line. In FE and skills terms, this means operational managers, leaders, and educators must be able to make learner-level decisions that support the people in their care. When an 'adminisphere' sits between well-meaning funding and the learner, opportunities are lost, learners become disillusioned, and the system lets them down.

On sharing good practice, it was felt that more databases are not the answer. The sector needs better ways of learning together, possibly through learning sets that allow practitioners to respond to what is actually in front of them.

Practice must come first; the learning follows. If we invert that, we risk turning inclusion into another academic exercise that does not serve the people it is meant to support.

The Collective also emphasised that inclusion must not be framed solely as a young person's issue. Adult learners experience late diagnosis, changing workforce demands, and the cumulative impact of unmet needs over time. As societal, technological and economic conditions evolve, the system must be capable of supporting adults to re-skill, re-enter education, and succeed in work. A truly inclusive environment requires policy to address the lifelong reality of neurodiversity, not only the school-to-college transition.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICE



The context

Discussion at the Collective strongly reinforced that workforce development is the critical enabling mechanism for inclusion. Participants argued that without a coherent, quality-assured national development offer for the FE and skills workforce, inclusive practice will remain uneven and dependent on local capacity.

There was a clear call for a professional body-style approach: defining what good looks like, establishing progression pathways, and supporting FE and skills providers to embed inclusive practice through leadership development, communities of practice, and evidence-informed continuing professional development.

How can FE and skills workforce deliver genuine inclusion? Five interconnected themes shaped the discussion.

Five themes

1. Trauma-informed transitions understanding the additive impact of challenges relating to neurodivergent challenges and inequity

The transition from secondary education was a recurring concern. Many learners arrive in post-16 settings carrying the weight of a school experience that did not serve them well. FE and skills staff need professional development that equips them to support continuity, emotional wellbeing, and progression into employment, recognising the gaps in skills and needs that may not have been recognised. This requires a joined-up approach across education, careers, and employers, ensuring inclusive practice extends beyond classrooms and into workplaces and apprenticeships.

The use of the term SEND encompasses a wide and diverse range of experiences and needs. This understanding is essential to designing services that are sufficiently tailored to deliver lasting change and meet individuals where they are.

2. Training: inconsistent, hard to scale, not tailored

Training provision is currently patchy: inconsistent across providers, difficult to scale, and not sufficiently tailored to the diverse experience levels across the workforce. A specific challenge raised was the range of entry routes into FE and skills. Staff entering directly from industry may have deep occupational expertise but little experience of SEND or inclusive pedagogy.

At the same time, high turnover and persistent vacancies mean professional development cannot be designed as a one-off intervention. It must be accessible, ongoing, and embedded, enabling new starters to access high-quality development quickly and consistently as a routine part of induction and early practice. Whole-organisation approaches are needed, treating staff as learners and cascading inclusive practice across teams over time.

3. Specialist recruitment

Recruitment of specialist professionals, such as occupational health practitioners, speech and language therapists, and similar roles, remains a critical gap. Delays in securing this specialist support negatively affect learner retention and outcomes. Workforce development strategies must address both upskilling the wider workforce and expanding specialist capacity within FE and skills, rather than treating these as separate problems.

4. Shared understanding across education and employment

A mindset shift is needed that bridges education and employment. This includes common terminology, greater staff awareness of the industries learners are progressing into, and better support for employers to create inclusive environments. Universal design principles were identified as a key solution, reframing inclusion as a collective responsibility rather than a specialist function.

The Collective also raised the challenge of inconsistent terminology across education, health, justice and employment, which leads to confusion, duplication and delay.

The Collective questioned whether educators and support staff always understand the industries learners are progressing into and argued that transition cannot succeed unless employers are supported to develop inclusive capability. Bridging the education-to-employment gap requires shared language, shared expectations, and professional development for both educators and employers.

5. The SEND review as a structural opportunity

The SEND review was identified as a genuine window for systemic change. There is growing momentum behind a needs-based, social model of inclusion to replace the deficit-focused medical model that still dominates much of the system. Participants felt the moment should not be wasted.

What the sector wants: actions now and next

Priority	Action	Who Owns It
Now	Establish what the plan is for rolling out SEND professional development across the FE and skills sector	DfE / ETF
Now	Introduce standardised, quality-assured mandatory professional development for all FE and skills staff, grounded in universal design principles	DfE / ETF
Now	Adopt a whole-organisation approach, starting with senior leaders, not classroom practitioners	ETF
Now	Make professional development flexible and post-16 specific – not a school-facing model repurposed for FE and skills	ETF



Priority	Action	Who Owns It
Now	Supplement mandatory professional development with specialist modules (e.g. pastoral support, SEND transitions)	ETF
Now	Create a national knowledge hub that clearly signposts available professional development, tools and resources, aligned to professional standards, and supported by searchable case studies and evidence of what works in practice	ETF
Next	Train more specialists for FE and skills: occupational health, speech and language, and related roles	DfE / NHSE
Next	Introduce outcome-based judgements to drive genuine improvement in practice	Ofsted
Next	Invest in digital enablement to reduce burden on teachers and learners	DfE / technology providers
Next	Build cross-sector working across education, health and justice, with shared resource platforms	DfE / DHSC / MoJ

The Collective was clear that the FE and skills workforce is not resistant to change. On the contrary, they are already managing increasing complexity with innovation and creativity. The challenge is not motivation, but capacity and confidence. Reform must therefore harness the will to improve by building conditions where the FE and skills workforce can see progress, learn from outcomes, and feel psychologically safe to adapt practice. Confidence grows when positive outcomes are visible and shared, and when practitioners are trusted as professionals rather than treated as delivery mechanisms.



CROSS-CUTTING THEMES



Across the Collective, four themes emerged consistently. These are not the concerns of one group or one corner of the sector; they are the sector's shared position.

The system is still reactive, not anticipatory

Whether in transition, assessment, or workforce development, the sector consistently finds itself responding after the fact. The information, the professional development, the support, and the resources arrive too late. Anticipation requires investment in early systems, shared data, and proactive professional development.

Inclusive practices are cultural, and not a service

Inclusion cannot be delivered by a policy or a compliance framework. It must be chosen by communities, families, educators, employers, and the wider networks around each learner. This requires a shift from tolerance to understanding, and from managing difference to valuing it.

Funding architecture is obstructing the learner

The funding exists. The will exists. What is consistently getting in the way is the administrative and structural distance between resource and learner. Whether through post-19 funding cliffs, funding pots that restrict practitioner judgement, or administrative layers that consume time better spent with learners, the system is not currently aligned with its own goals.

Technology must be a tool, not a burden

Digital enablement was raised as a genuine opportunity, but also a risk. Technology that reduces administrative load and returns time to educators is essential. Technology that adds another layer of compliance, reporting, or navigation for already stretched practitioners is not the answer.

Research-informed practice must become routine

Participants repeatedly returned to the need for practitioners to act as researchers in practice: testing what works, learning from evidence, and adapting provision in response to learner outcomes. Curiosity was described as a professional capability, not a personal trait. The system should support action research, inquiry-based CPD, and evaluation approaches that help FE and skills providers learn quickly and scale improvement. Without this, SEND reform risks relying on anecdote rather than evidence.

Collaboration must be designed into the system

Participants emphasised that sustainable inclusion cannot rely on individual relationships or informal goodwill. Cross-sector working across education, health, justice and employment must be structurally enabled through shared frameworks, shared accountability, and shared resources. Formal and informal communities of practice were seen as a practical solution, allowing FE and skills providers to generate solutions collectively, share what works, and build system confidence.

Co-design and co-production are essential

The Collective view was that learners, parents, carers, communities and employers must be active partners in shaping provision. Co-production is not consultation after decisions are made; it is designing services and systems with those who experience them.

An outward-facing mindset is a workforce necessity

The Collective highlighted the need for a shift from inward-looking institutional approaches towards outward-looking curiosity. This means learning from what is happening elsewhere in the sector, sharing solutions across boundaries, and actively seeking evidence of what works.

Participants highlighted that the system will not shift without leadership that models curiosity, innovation and outward mindset thinking. Leaders need to create cultures where the FE and skills workforce can be active researchers in practice, learning from what is happening elsewhere, testing new approaches, and scaling what works.



The workforce must be supported to develop as confident, reflective practitioners who ask better questions, not simply deliver inherited processes. Without curiosity and outward-facing professionalism, reform risks becoming compliance-led rather than improvement-led.

Universal design as the professional baseline

A strong consensus emerged that universal design principles should be the baseline for inclusive practice across FE and skills. Participants challenged the implicit assumption that SEND support is for some learners rather than a design principle for all learners.

Inclusion should not depend on a label, diagnosis, or threshold, but should be embedded in teaching, support, assessment and organisational design. This framing positions inclusive practice as a core professional competence rather than an optional specialism.

THE SECTOR'S ASK OF POLICYMAKERS

These are not aspirational wishes. They are the practical, implementable asks of a sector that understands the problem, has the expertise to address it, and is calling for the structural conditions to do so.

1. Mandate early, evidence-informed and consistently applied, non-diagnostic assessment at every stage of the post-16 learner journey, so that support is triggered by what a learner needs – not by whether they hold a diagnosis.

2. Require technology providers to carry administrative load, not create it. The test for any new digital system should be: does this give educators more time with learners or less?

3. Build national transition accountability – a shared framework that follows the learner from Year 10 through further education and into employment, with clear ownership and clear standards at each stage.

4. Introduce standardised, quality-assured, post-16 specific mandatory professional development for the FE and skills workforce, grounded in universal design principles and supplemented by specialist modules.

5. Trust practitioners. Reform the funding architecture to remove the layers between resource and learner, and empower tutors, operational managers and inclusion leads to make learner-level decisions.

6. Engage directly with the lived experience of navigating the FE system. Those responsible for designing and overseeing policy should understand the realities of further education from the inside.

7. Establish professional standards and capability expectations for Local Authority SEND casework, ensuring consistent knowledge of policy, post-16 pathways and transition practice across the country.

8. Build employer readiness into SEND reform, including guidance and workforce development that supports inclusive apprenticeships and workplaces.

9. Develop a cross-government common language for SEND and neuro-inclusion, shared across education, health, justice and employment to reduce fragmentation and improve communication.

10. Invest in professional development and supply pipelines for specialist roles supporting FE and skills learners (including occupational health and speech and language therapy), ensuring provision can meet complexity of need.

The Collective's conclusions underline that reform cannot succeed through policy intent alone. The system requires an enabling infrastructure for professional practice: clear standards, scalable professional development pathways, quality assurance, and mechanisms for evidence-sharing and continuous improvement. This is where the role of national convening and workforce development leadership becomes critical. A sustainable SEND transition system depends on building capability across the whole FE and skills workforce, ensuring inclusion is not dependent on isolated expertise but embedded as a shared professional norm.

The Collective's shared message was clear:

The system must move beyond repeated diagnosis of the problem. Reform must be designed so that the sector is not having the same conversation in five years' time but instead can point to sustained improvements in learner experience, workforce confidence and long-term outcomes.

CONTRIBUTORS AND SOURCES

The report draws on relevant policy context including the Government's 2026 Schools White Paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving', the post-16 Education and skills White Paper (October 2025), and the Education Select Committee inquiry 'Making Further Education Fit for the Future' (2025).

Compiled and edited by the ETF and FE News Bridging the SEND Transition Collective, April 2026.

ETF is the professional body for the further education and skills workforce, working across roles, regions and organisations to unlock the full potential of the sector. We provide clear standards, expert-led development and a welcoming community to support individual and collective growth. Together, we're creating a more confident, connected system that transforms lives, communities and the economy.

Our work is supported through funding by the Department for Education (DfE), provider funding and professional membership.

157–197 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 9SP
020 3740 8280
enquiries@etfoundation.co.uk
ETFOUNDATION.CO.UK