

New SEND Reforms – What Does It Mean For Acoustics?

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A clearer, more consistent approach to support children with SEND

The Government's new [Schools White Paper](#), published on Monday 23 February 2026, introduces significant reforms to how mainstream schools support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Under the proposals, budgets will be allocated directly to mainstream schools - rather than via local authorities, to deliver additional SEND support.

Children with special needs at mainstream schools will be eligible for individual support plans (ISPs). So, whilst Educational Health Care Plans (EHCPs) may be reserved for children with the most severe and complex needs, new plans for children on ISPs will still confer additional support and legal rights.

This shift places increased emphasis on the quality and consistency of **ordinarily available provision** in mainstream settings. Schools will be required to make **reasonable adjustments** to meet a wide range of needs, including autism, ADHD, mental-health needs, sensory impairments, and speech, language and communication needs - and [may face legal action](#) where expectations are not met.

[A clear national framework, 'independently verified by evidence-based organisation'](#), is expected, which is welcome to provide clear guidelines and equal expectations for schools across the country. While details are still emerging, existing local authority guidance offers an early indication of how expectations for environmental conditions - including acoustics - may evolve.

Why acoustics matter in ordinarily available provision

Many local authorities already publish **Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP)** guidance to help schools meet their statutory duties under the SEND Code of Practice. These documents often highlight the importance of the physical environment in supporting children and young people. However, the scope, and detail of the guidance varies widely.

Across our work with mainstream schools, at [Anderson Acoustics](#) we regularly review the relevant OAP guidance alongside statutory acoustic standards - including [Building Regulation E4](#), the [School Premises Regulations](#) and, where applicable, the [DfE Output Specification](#). What we see is a clear pattern: environmental expectations are inconsistent, and acoustic requirements in particular differ markedly between authorities.

Most OAP guides do, however, recognise that reasonable acoustic adjustments are essential for many pupils. This includes both specialist acoustic performance standards and everyday classroom management techniques that support positive listening conditions.

Which needs require acoustic adjustments?

Our evidence-based review identifies the groups of pupils most directly affected by poor acoustic conditions. Children with **Special Hearing and Communication Needs (SHCN)** - as defined in [Building Bulletin 93](#) - require adjusted acoustic environments. This includes pupils who are d/Deaf or have visual impairment, temporary hearing loss, speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), Autism, ADHD and Auditory Processing Disorder.

[Our research](#) also shows that children with **SEMH needs** and **Dyslexia** benefit from improved acoustic conditions and should be included within the SHCN definition. National DfE Census data indicates that SHCN needs account for around **11% of an average mainstream classroom**, with a further **15%** experiencing temporary hearing loss at any given time. Young children and those with English as an Additional Language are also disproportionately affected, (both are protected characteristics under the Equality Act).

Should adjustments focus on specific age groups?

While reasonable acoustic adjustments benefit all age groups, Early Years settings show the highest prevalence of SHCN. This age group is also more likely to experience more prevalent temporary hearing loss and speech hearing and communication needs - both can be harder to identify and diagnose in the classroom.

Despite this, statutory acoustic standards apply only to school-based Early Years providers, which represent around 20% of the sector. Childminders and private, voluntary and independent nurseries are not subject to any equivalent acoustic regulation. As a result, some Early Years settings are most at risk due to an absence of regulated acoustic environments.

However, current statutory acoustic standards for school-based nurseries, and mainstream primary and secondary schools also require reasonable adjustment to meet the needs of students with SHCN.

Are current statutory standards sufficient?

The statutory standards within [Building Bulletin 93](#) - designed to meet [Building Regulation E4](#), [The School Premises Regulations](#) and the [DfE Output Specification](#) - vary depending on context. [Our research](#) shows that in many mainstream scenarios, particularly **secondary classrooms**, **naturally ventilated spaces** and **refurbishment projects**, the mainstream standards are not sufficient to fully support pupils with SHCN.

[Building Bulletin 93](#) references an **enhanced acoustic standard** for pupils with SHCN, with lower ambient noise levels and shorter reverberation times. Additional guidance is also available in [BSI PAS 6463: Design for the Mind. Neurodiversity & the Built Environment](#), which offers useful direction for designing inclusive spaces.

However, these enhanced standards do not always reflect the practicalities for mainstream classrooms - including the need for natural ventilation, the need for room acoustics to support the teacher's voice to reach the back of a mainstream classroom, and the occupancy noise generated from a typical mainstream class size (even under quiet conditions).

In the past, one solution has been to place children with SEND in a smaller, quieter space, and the DfE have recently proposed that every school should have an 'inclusion base' to serve this purpose. However, this may not be seen as a wholly inclusive method.

A universal, reasonably adjusted acoustic standard for mainstream classrooms is therefore needed to support the broad range of needs covered by both ISPs and EHCPs across all mainstream settings.

Taking a universal design approach, our review moves towards a pragmatic, reasonably adjusted acoustic performance standard for mainstream classrooms, to balance the needs of all users, including those with SEND.

Classroom management techniques that support better acoustics

Acoustic performance alone cannot guarantee an inclusive listening environment. Effective classroom practices are essential. [Our review](#) highlights practical techniques that benefit all learners, including:

- Seating younger children close together for critical listening time.
- Using visual cues to settle the class before key tasks.

- Monitoring classroom noise levels using simple apps.
- Addressing small groups at close range and moving around the room.
- Repeating pupils' responses to ensure speech intelligibility.
- Using listening aids for a broader range of needs, not only d/Deaf pupils.
- Balancing the benefits of noise-cancelling headphones with the potential for social exclusion.
- Providing quiet breakout spaces directly adjoining the classroom.

Beyond classrooms: addressing acoustics across the school

Transition and social spaces are often the most challenging environments for children with sensory or communication needs. Corridors, stairwells and particularly dining halls can be overwhelming due to high occupancy noise.

There is currently **no recognised reasonably adjusted acoustic performance standard for dining halls in [Building Bulletin 93](#) and [PAS 6463](#)**. Our research has established such a standard - providing schools with practical benchmarks to improve comfort, reduce noise build-up and support psychological safety.

While [PAS 6463](#) offers guidance on an adjusted reverberation time standard for circulation spaces, its evidence base is unclear, and measurement of reverberation time is not appropriate for corridor spaces. A more achievable approach may be to enhance the sound absorption specification outlined for standard corridor spaces [Requirement E3 of the Building Regulations](#).

Outdoor areas also play an important role in supporting sensory regulation. Thoughtfully soundscaped outdoor spaces, including restorative gardens and quiet seating zones, help promote wellbeing and emotional regulations, connection with nature and suitable conditions for outdoor learning. Although not regulated, designers can reference the IoA/ANC Design Guide for appropriate noise limits.

Some (but by no means all) local authority OAP guides already highlight adjustments which go beyond statutory regulation, such as acoustic panels in early years spaces, soft furnishings, quiet zones and in-class noise monitoring - demonstrating positive steps but reinforcing the need for national consistency.

Towards a clear national framework for acoustic inclusion

We welcome the development of a national framework that sets clear, consistent expectations for ordinarily available provision. For acoustics, we recommend that the framework provides:

- **A clear definition of needs requiring adjusted acoustic conditions**, including SHCN, SEMH and Dyslexia.
- **A consistent, evidence-based standard for mainstream classrooms**, reflecting practical design constraints.
- **Guidance for Early Years settings**, particularly those outside current regulation.
- **Recognised standards for social and circulation spaces**, including dining halls.
- **Integration of classroom management strategies** as part of a whole-school approach.

Schools, local authorities and design teams would all benefit from consistent national guidance for acoustics that supports inclusive practice and helps meet legal expectations.
