

# White Paper

Insights from Innovarés Roundtable on Navigating the  
SEND Crisis Through Design and Delivery (2026)



(Special Educational Needs & Disabilities)

# Transforming SEND Through Design

## Insights from Innovaré's Roundtable on Navigating the SEND Crisis Through Design and Delivery (2026)

**The UK is at a key point in how it designs and delivers school environments for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. The number of pupils needing SEND support continues to grow, yet many school buildings, especially newer ones, still fail to meet basic needs around access, sensory comfort, behaviour, and wellbeing.** Innovaré hosted a roundtable bringing together SEND practitioners, school inclusion leads and education design specialists to discuss how the built environment affects inclusion in practice. The discussion focused on what is currently not working in many school buildings, where design choices are creating barriers, and what practical changes could make a real difference for pupils and staff.

The roundtable took place shortly after the publication of the government's schools' white paper Every Child Achieving and Thriving (Department for Education, 2026). While the government document sets out a clear vision for inclusion and earlier support within mainstream education, this paper looks at how those aims play out in real school buildings. It uses lived experience from the sector to explore how design and layout can either support or undermine that vision.

This white paper sets out those insights and turns them into clear, practical guidance for designers, local authorities, multi academy trusts and policymakers. It focuses on flexibility, safety, accessibility, sensory needs, acoustics, and outdoor space, and shows the real impact on children, staff, and families when these issues are not properly addressed.



## The current context:

### Why SEND enabling design matters more than ever rising need and limited flexibility

Participants described a steady rise in pupils with complex and overlapping needs. These include physical disabilities, sensory processing differences, autism, anxiety, visual impairments, and medical conditions. Despite this, many schools are still designed around the idea of a single, typical pupil.

This reflects the national picture described in Every Child Achieving and Thriving, which highlights both rising SEND demand and the expectation that mainstream schools will meet a wider range of needs earlier and more consistently. The roundtable discussion helped to show where existing buildings are making this harder to achieve.

As one participant put it:

*“Every cohort is different. Every year changes. Buildings need to be able to flex with those needs.”*

## The hidden crisis:

### Staff wellbeing and retention

The impact of poor design does not stop with pupils. Staff are also affected. Teachers working in noisy, overly warm, or visually busy environments reported higher stress levels and burnout. Many leave the profession, often when they need stability and flexibility most. Newer teachers also expect schools to take wellbeing seriously, including the space they work in.

Design decisions often make this worse. Staff described practical but frustrating issues such as toilets being far from classrooms, no quiet space to take a short break, and nowhere to make phone calls or complete admin. While these issues may seem small, together they increase pressure on already stretched staff.

There was a clear agreement around the table that better buildings support staff retention, and that stable staff teams lead to better outcomes for pupils. This directly supports the government’s position that SEND reform and inclusive education depend on a supported and sustainable workforce, not just funding and policy changes.

## Accessibility failures:

### Everyday barriers for pupils

Many SEND pupils rely on lifts to move around school buildings. When lifts break down, pupils who use powered wheelchairs can be left unable to reach lessons, toilets or exits. In some cases, pupils may be stuck on a floor for hours.

Staff described how this affects emergency evacuation plans and puts extra pressure on adults who must move equipment or supervise pupils instead of teaching. Although evacuation chairs exist, those suitable for powered wheelchairs are often expensive and impractical.

Participants were clear that key teaching spaces, toilets and specialist provision should never depend on lift access alone. This point strongly links to the white paper’s aim of making mainstream schools genuinely accessible rather than relying on workarounds.

### Inflexible ground floor planning

In many newer schools, the ground floor is given over to offices, dining halls, or performance spaces. Teaching rooms, including core subjects like English and science, are often placed upstairs. For pupils with physical or sensory needs, this means repeated lift use and long journeys through busy corridors.

A more inclusive approach discussed at the roundtable was flexible ground floor planning. This allows any subject to be taught downstairs when needed and gives schools the ability to adapt space around individual pupils.

This flexibility is essential if mainstream schools are to deliver the inclusive approach set out in Every Child Achieving and Thriving. Without it, policy aims risk being blocked by buildings that cannot adapt.



# Sensory and behaviour regulation:

## Spaces that help rather than harm

Many pupils with sensory needs need quick access to calm, low stimulation spaces. However, schools often provide only one central sensory room, which may be far from classrooms. Pupils may have to walk through long, noisy corridors at the very moment they are struggling to regulate.

One example shared described a pupil becoming increasingly distressed while crossing the school to reach a sensory room, then refusing to leave once calm. This showed how location matters just as much as provision.

The discussion highlighted the value of smaller, local spaces close to classrooms. These included quiet seating in wider corridors, small nooks for one to one support, and acoustic pods where budgets allow. These spaces support regulation while keeping pupils connected to learning.



## Conclusion

The SEND crisis cannot be solved through funding or staffing alone. The design of school buildings plays a critical role. When schools are built without a clear understanding of sensory, physical, and emotional needs, the result can be unsafe spaces that exclude pupils and place heavy strain on staff.

The roundtable made one point noticeably clear. Good design is not expensive. Poor design is. The cost is felt through disrupted learning, staff leaving the profession, families under pressure, and schools forced into costly changes after opening.

Every Child Achieving and Thriving sets out an ambitious vision for SEND reform. This white paper shows how that vision depends on school buildings that are flexible, safe, and designed around real needs. Innovaré remains committed to supporting this approach and to placing children, staff, and communities at the centre of every design decision.

## References

Department for Education. (2026). Every Child Achieving and Thriving: Reforms to the schools and SEND systems in England. UK Government.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving>

To explore the key findings from the roundtable, or to discuss plans for a new SEN or SEND school or expansion, get in touch to see how Innovaré Offsite can support your project:



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