# MAINSTREAM AUTISM SUPPORT IN NORTH WILTSHIRE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Findings from a parent-led survey

2nd November 2026

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# Contents


Purpose of this report ..... 2
Executive summary ..... 3
About the survey ..... 4
Who did families tell us about? ..... 5
Are children's needs currently being met? ..... 6
Support without an EHCP or diagnosis ..... 7
What families want mainstream support to look like ..... 8
1. Staff who understand autism ..... 8
2. Places to regulate before reaching crisis ..... 8
3. Better support around transitions ..... 8
4. Flexible access to specialist support ..... 8
Parents' voices ..... 9
Staff who understand autism ..... 9
Masking and hidden need ..... 9
Sensory regulation and flexibility ..... 10
Transitions, anxiety and school avoidance ..... 10
Earlier specialist support within mainstream ..... 11
Access to learning and social inclusion ..... 12
Implications for Wiltshire Council and SENDIASS ..... 13
Implications for schools and governors ..... 14
Limitations ..... 15
Conclusion ..... 16
Parent summary: questions to ask your school ..... 17

## Purpose of this report

This report shares the findings of a small parent-led survey about support for autistic and potentially autistic children in mainstream schools in North Wiltshire.

It is intended to help:

- Wiltshire Council and SENDIASS understand the experiences and priorities of local families when planning mainstream SEND support
- schools and governors consider how resources for inclusion and SEN support could best respond to the needs of their pupils
- parents and carers have informed conversations with schools about their inclusion plans and use of SEND funding

The survey began in the context of discussion about Resource Base provision. However, the findings point to a wider issue: how mainstream schools can better support children who don't qualify for Resource Base placement, for example because they don't have an EHCP, who are diagnosed autistic, awaiting assessment, or suspected by their parents to be autistic.

# Executive summary

This parent-led survey received 37 responses covering 38 children attending schools in North Wiltshire. It identifies recurring experiences and priorities among the families who responded.

Three findings stand out:

1. **Need extends well beyond children with EHCPs.**
   Only 10 of the 38 children (26%) had an EHCP. The remaining 28 children (74%) did not. Yet 25 children (66%) were reported to have provision that did not adequately meet their needs.

2. **Families strongly favoured support that can reach children while they remain in mainstream education.** Of the 38 children:
   - 22 (58%) were thought likely to benefit from remaining mainstream pupils while accessing Resource Base expertise, facilities or appropriate interventions
   - 10 (26%) might benefit from either this model or a formal Resource Base placement, depending on their needs at the time
   - 4 (11%) were thought to need a formal Resource Base placement
   - one parent selected neither and one was unsure

   Importantly, all 28 children without an EHCP were described as potentially benefiting from a model that included remaining in mainstream while accessing Resource Base expertise or support. This suggests that specialist expertise linked to Resource Bases has value beyond the relatively small number of children formally placed within them.

3. **Families were remarkably consistent about what would help.** The most frequently selected forms of support were:

| Support | Children | % |
|---|---|---|
| Sensory or regulation space | 36 | 95% |
| Autism-informed staff training | 35 | 92% |
| Autism specialist advice for school staff | 31 | 82% |
| Support with transitions and change | 30 | 79% |
| Small-group specialist support | 26 | 68% |
| Visual and communication supports | 25 | 66% |
| Social or communication groups | 22 | 58% |

   These priorities point towards a model combining stronger everyday inclusive practice in mainstream schools with access to specialist autism knowledge and targeted support when needed.

## About the survey

The survey ran for just 3.5 weeks, from 7 to 31 October 2026. It was a parent-led local survey and responses were anonymous. It was distributed through parent-to-parent sharing, local Facebook groups, Royal Wootton Bassett Town Council, Purton Magazine, Cricklade Town Council Facebook page, Purton Parish Council, and the WPCC newsletter.

Its reach was small. However, these community routes enabled the survey to reach some families who may not otherwise have known about or participated in formal Council consultations.

The original survey website remains available at https://north-wiltshire-autism-survey.lovable.app/ , and original survey questions can also be viewed there.

For the survey, North Wiltshire was defined as Cricklade and the surrounding Royal Wootton Bassett, Purton and Malmesbury areas, together with the surrounding villages and communities listed on the survey.

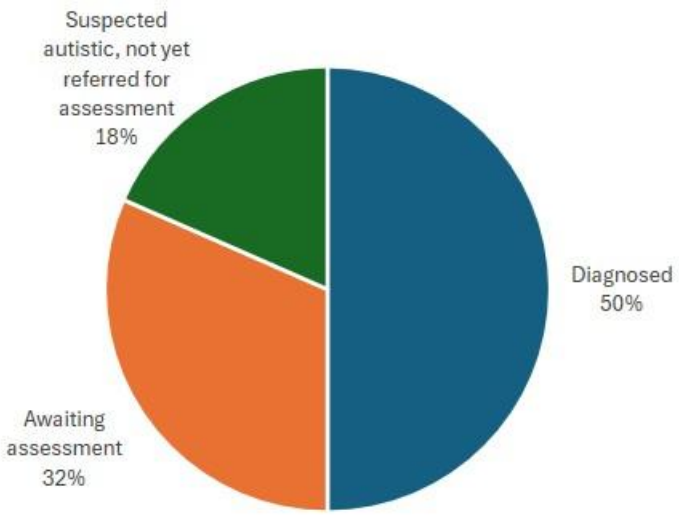
There were 37 responses covering 38 child records. One respondent also referred in free text to another child they had been unable to enter into the survey. All quantitative figures in this report are based only on the 38 completed child records.

## Who did families tell us about?

Of the 38 children, 19 (50%) had an autism diagnosis, 12 (32%) were awaiting an autism assessment, and 7 (18%) were suspected by their parent or carer to be autistic but were not currently awaiting assessment.

The survey therefore gives useful insight into families at different stages, including those navigating the period before assessment or formal identification, and highlights that support needs are present from before referral for autism assessment is considered.

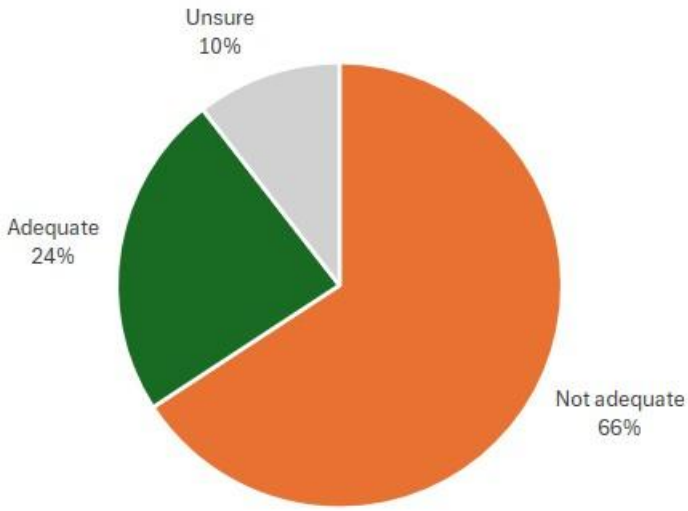
**Autism Status of Children in the Survey**



## Are children's needs currently being met?

Parents reported that provision did not adequately meet needs for 25 children (66%), adequately met needs for 9 children (24%), was uncertain for 4 children (11%).

**Adequacy of Current Provision**




This does not mean that schools are unwilling to support these children. Some parents specifically described schools or individual staff making considerable efforts. Instead, the comments frequently described a gap between what mainstream staff currently have the knowledge, time, specialist support or resources to provide and what children need.

One parent wrote, “Staff training would help them recognise when behaviour is communication.” Another described how, “Even though she is masking she still requires the support.”

Parents also described anxiety, school avoidance, difficulties with transitions, sensory overload, dysregulation, social vulnerability and children holding themselves together during the school day before becoming distressed at home.

A recurring concern was that academic ability can hide support needs. One parent wrote, “Because she achieves educationally she receives little support or understanding.” Another said their child was “fully capable of achieving the goals she is set but requires additional support.”

These comments suggest that attainment alone should not be used as an indicator of whether a child is coping successfully in mainstream education.

## Support without an EHCP or diagnosis

One of the clearest findings is that need is not confined to children with statutory plans.

**74% of the children did not have an EHCP.** Of these children, every one was described as potentially benefiting from remaining a mainstream pupil while accessing Resource Base expertise, facilities or interventions, either as their preferred model or as one possible model depending on need.

This finding is particularly relevant to the direction of national policy. The Department for Education's new Inclusive Mainstream Fund is intended to help mainstream schools provide earlier support and remove commonly occurring barriers to learning. Government guidance specifically states that targeted support should be available without requiring formal assessment or diagnosis.

This survey suggests that families in North Wiltshire see a substantial need for exactly this kind of support.

# What families want mainstream support to look like

The responses suggest that families need:

## 1. Staff who understand autism

35 of 38 families selected autism-informed staff training, while 31 selected access to specialist autism advice for staff.

Parents described the importance of distinguishing dysregulation from deliberate poor behaviour, understanding masking and anxiety, making reasonable adjustments and responding consistently across the school.

This suggests a role for specialist expertise not only in supporting individual children, but also in building the capability of mainstream staff. It also indicates that autism training for all school staff, even if basic and low-cost, would be tremendously beneficial.

## 2. Places to regulate before reaching crisis

36 of 38 children were thought likely to benefit from sensory or regulation space.

Families described children needing somewhere quieter, lower demand or less overwhelming to go before distress escalated. This was often framed as a way of helping a child remain successfully within mainstream education, rather than separating them from it. Again this is a simple intervention, achievable in any setting, that has the potential to reduce pressure on more costly interventions when crisis points are reached.

## 3. Better support around transitions

30 children were identified as needing better support with transitions and change. Parents referred to daily transitions into school as well as larger transitions, particularly the move to secondary education.

## 4. Flexible access to specialist support

Families did not describe mainstream and specialist provision as two separate systems. Many favoured a model in which children could remain part of mainstream education but access specialist expertise, facilities or interventions when required.

One parent with experience of a Resource Base commented, “It should be a lot easier for children to move between mainstream and a resource base.”

This suggests that Resource Bases may have value not only as placements but potentially as local centres of expertise that strengthen the wider mainstream system, where commissioning and capacity allow.

# Parents' voices

These are parents' answers to the question *"What difference would access to specialist autism support at a local mainstream school make to your child(ren) and/or family?"*

Quotations are reproduced as submitted and grouped into themes. Where a detail could identify a child or family, it has been replaced with [identifying information omitted].

## Staff who understand autism

"Staff training would help them recognise when behaviour is communication.
Know when and how to make reasonable adjustments.
Keep realistic expectations and not compare to neurotypical children.
The power of words and language when addressing things with a child.
A strong home/school communication.
Better communication with the SENDCo.
A meeting to discuss reasonable adjustments and expectations.
Movement breaks.
Being able to learn in a way that's comfortable and most productive. E.g. standing, sitting on a wobble cushion"

"Having staff that understand her needs and having more support with transitions and regulation space would be better. She goes in upset most days despite trying to make changes, so would be good for all staff to have training on how to support these children."

"It would have meant that my child perhaps would have been treated better, with more understanding & things out in place to help him rather than treat him like he's naughty. So much trauma has been caused by them."

"It would make the world of difference to have teachers trained in Special Educational needs. My daughter needs adaptations going up to senior school and those adaptations need to be taken forward on to her senior school journey."

## Masking and hidden need

"I believe it would make a big difference, the school my daughter is currently in doesn't understand that even though she is masking she still requires the support and only support children who show their struggles."

“My child would be able to release some pressure during the day, learn in a less stressful environment. Family life would improve as well, as endless masking during the day causes meltdowns at home.”

“My child is extremely intelligent but socially inept. Because she achieves educationally she receives little support or understanding. She is lonely, depressed and has zero opportunities or support to build relationships. This would help her immeasurably.”

“It would be transformational. School is currently the place of masking, of accumulating angst which is then brought home and released. Staff try but without specialist knowledge training and resource they’re just not able to make the reasonable adjustments (nor do they all appreciate just how big a difference this would make) to the children in their care. I think there’s a perception that if it’s not in evidence at school (as in our case due to phD level masking..) it hen there’s not much they need or want to do. It’s only when something goes awry, when in reality it needs to be a shift in understanding and wider management which benefits the child, their family and ultimately the school too when they have a content and engaged pupil.”

## Sensory regulation and flexibility

“A space for him to take time out when he needs to, a quiet space to go to at the start of his school day as he has huge school avoidance”

“I think my son would receive support to help him manage his anxiety about going to school, being in groups, and dealing with transitions and change. I think having the option for him to have flexibility would help him. E.g. options to get up and move around/stim”

“My child would be able to access lessons/learning based on skill rather than age. It would mean lower demand and more understanding around environmental sensory triggers that can escalate into dysregulation. It would also help the parental guilt of sending our child to an environment that isn’t made for them, knowing they’re struggling but not being able to do anything about it.”

“Staff that can provide a relational approach, that understand the difference between behaviour issues and dysregulation and needing support rather than punishment.”

## Transitions, anxiety and school avoidance

“At present difficulty with the transition at the beginning of the school day and homework load is causing significant anxiety and school avoidance. It is clear that some members of staff think this is defiance/naughtiness and this is making the situation worse. I suspect that enhanced awareness and training for both ourselves and

the school could overcome these issues without more significant intervention/moving school as our daughter is otherwise academically capable."

"A consistent approach by all staff, some are excellent others, not so which can trigger school avoidance and high anxiety. TAs are much better with support but school only has a few to meet the needs of many- teachers too stretched. More investment in support staff is needed."

"Life changing to have access to neuro affirming support early enough to prevent longer term issues such as EBSA and burnout in Secondary."

## Earlier specialist support within mainstream

"Our son is autistic, academically able and currently has no EHCP. Access to Resource Base expertise, facilities and targeted support while remaining in mainstream would help prevent his needs escalating to crisis point, and reduce the risk of him later needing a formal Resource Base or special-school placement."

"We are currently waiting for an assessment for ASD in the hope of diagnosis to push forward for an EHCP. Hopefully funding will then be granted the help support my child in school. Specialist support could be gained without the diagnosis my Child may be included in most lessons have teachers that understand how to manage autistic children and not just separate them from the other children."

"A primary school with specific support for autistic children may have meant that my child could remain in mainstream schooling."

"We are in a resource base. [identifying information omitted] We would like to have our child in the resource base at some points and mainstream for other lessons they enjoy and excel at. This has been very hard to fight for and provision of this/acceptance of this need is a constant argument. It should be a lot easier for children to move between mainstream and a resource base l. Timetables should be synchronised better and mainstream staff should have the right training. There should be better culture of acceptance and inclusion."

"[identifying information omitted] We need autism supportive environments not just teaching. Also resource bases that support academic children. [identifying information omitted] She masks a lot and support in mainstream would help massively. My village school support her needs well at the moment. Although we talk about early intervention my concern is more around secondary school. In the area mainstream support seems to be nothing. [identifying information omitted] we need more options."

## Access to learning and social inclusion

“They would get more support and have professionals that could identify needs in real time and help them fully access the curriculum”

“My child’s school currently doesn’t offer her any support despite having a Dr’s report listing the adjustments she should have available to her. [identifying information omitted] If there were specialist autism support available to her I feel she would progress a lot better than she is, and would have someone to help guide her in the social aspect of school. We are having to do an awful lot of extra school-related work with her at home to enable her to reach expected targets in school because the school are failing to provide the support that she requires. [identifying information omitted] She is fully capable of achieving the goals she is set but requires additional support in order to do so.”

“She does not realise when children are being unkind to her at school (as long as what they’re doing is labelled ‘a game’ - and the children know this), and this has been communicated to the school but there has been no support offered to her in order to recognise different behaviours, or anyone to check in with her about what sort of ‘games’ have been played during break times.”

“It would mean my daughter can reach her full potential and believe in herself.”

## Implications for Wiltshire Council and SENDIASS

These findings suggest five areas that merit consideration when developing mainstream autism support in Wiltshire.

1. **Support should be based on identified need, not diagnosis alone.** Children awaiting assessment, children without an EHCP and children whose difficulties are less visible may still face significant barriers to learning and participation.
2. **Resource Base facilities and expertise should have a wider role.** Alongside formal placements, consideration could be given to how specialist staff, knowledge, interventions or facilities might support pupils who remain enrolled in mainstream provision.
3. **Mainstream staff capability is key.** Families placed autism-informed training and specialist advice among their highest priorities. Investment in expertise may therefore have an impact across many pupils rather than only those receiving individual interventions.
4. **Academic attainment should not be treated as evidence that support is unnecessary.** Responses highlighted masking, anxiety, social difficulties, dysregulation and school avoidance among children who may nevertheless be academically able.
5. **Families should be involved in planning provision.** Parent experience can identify barriers that may not always be visible within school, particularly masking, distress after school and emerging school avoidance.

## Implications for schools and governors

The timing of this survey is particularly relevant. For 2026 to 2027, mainstream schools are receiving the new Inclusive Mainstream Fund alongside their existing core funding and notional SEN budget. The purpose is to strengthen inclusive practice and provide earlier support.

Schools must publish an inclusion strategy by 31 December 2026. The strategy must identify barriers to learning and participation, describe activities intended to address them and include budgeted costs. The Department for Education also advises schools to engage families when identifying barriers and developing their approach.

Governors and trustees have a specific role in scrutinising this strategy and discussing how the school is using its Inclusive Mainstream Fund allocation alongside its wider budget.

The findings of this survey provide a useful local evidence source for those conversations. They suggest schools should particularly consider whether their inclusion strategy adequately addresses:

- autism-informed staff knowledge (highest priority)
- sensory and regulation needs (highest priority)
- access to specialist advice
- transition support
- targeted small-group support
- communication and visual supports
- social inclusion
- children who mask
- academically able autistic pupils
- children who need support before diagnosis or an EHCP is in place

This does not mean every school should spend money in the same way. Spending should reflect the needs of its own pupils. However, schools should be able to explain how they have identified those needs, what barriers they are prioritising and why their chosen spending is likely to address them.

## Limitations

This was a small, self-selecting convenience sample. Families chose whether to respond, and those with particular interest in autism or concerns about current provision were more likely to participate. The survey therefore cannot tell us what proportion of all autistic pupils have unmet needs, nor whether one school or area performs better than another.

Diagnosis, provision and experiences were reported by parents and were not independently verified. The findings should therefore be treated as evidence of recurring experiences and priorities among participating families, rather than estimates of prevalence.

The consistency of several responses, particularly around staff knowledge, regulation, specialist advice and transitions, nevertheless gives clear areas where intervention is likely to have a significant impact.

# Conclusion

The message from this small group of North Wiltshire families is straightforward: Many autistic and potentially autistic children appear to need more support within mainstream education, and many of those children do not have an EHCP.

Families are asking for earlier, more flexible support: knowledgeable staff, access to autism expertise, places to regulate, help with transitions and targeted interventions before difficulties escalate and more costly intervention becomes necessary.

## Parent summary: questions to ask your school

During 2026 to 2027, mainstream schools are receiving additional Inclusive Mainstream Fund money. Schools must publish an inclusion strategy by 31 December 2026 explaining the barriers faced by pupils, what the school is doing about them and the costs of the activities it plans to provide. Support is intended to include children who need help without waiting for a diagnosis or formal statutory process.

Parents can therefore reasonably ask their school leadership team and governors:

1. What is your Inclusive Mainstream Fund allocation and how are you planning to use it to meet the needs of autistic and potentially autistic pupils?
2. What autism training will staff receive, and how will they obtain specialist autism advice when a pupil is struggling?
3. Can pupils access a quiet or sensory regulation space when they need it?
4. What support is available for transitions, including starting school, daily transitions and moving to secondary school?
5. What have you done to identify the specific needs of the autistic and potentially autistic pupils at the school?
6. How do you identify children who mask or are academically able but struggling emotionally, socially or with attendance?
7. What support will children be able to access without an EHCP or autism diagnosis?