

Leicestershire's Belonging in Education Strategy

Leicestershire is a place where children can build strong foundations; be safe and belong, enjoy and achieve



2026-2029



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Statement of Intent

In Leicestershire, partners work together to ensure there is a commitment to belonging. All our children and young people feel a sense of belonging in Education, so they can live their best lives.

Forward

Every day in Leicestershire, I see the extraordinary potential within our children and young people. Their curiosity, courage, and resilience remind us why education matters—not just as a pathway to achievement, but as a place where identity, confidence and hope are shaped. It is this belief in possibility that underpins *Leicestershire's Belonging in Education Strategy 2026–2029*.

Belonging is powerful. When a child truly feels they belong—when they are seen, heard, valued and celebrated—everything changes. They take risks. They grow in confidence. They learn with greater purpose. They form relationships that anchor them through challenge. And they begin to imagine futures that feel within reach. Belonging is not a “nice to have”; it is the foundation on which lives are built.

This strategy represents a shared vision for a county where every child and young person has that foundation. It calls us to be bold, compassionate and united in our commitment to inclusion. It asks us to listen deeply to our children—because their voices show us the way. And it challenges us to work differently across schools, families, services and communities, so that no young person ever feels alone or overlooked within their educational journey.

What inspires me most is that this strategy is not built from theory alone, but from the hearts, experiences and contributions of those who know our system best—children and young people, parent carers, educators, and partners from across Leicestershire. It is a collective promise to stand with our children and young people, especially when they face barriers, and to create environments that lift them up rather than hold them back.

Together, we have the opportunity to shape an education system where belonging is woven into every interaction, every decision, every classroom and every relationship. A system where children walk through the school gates knowing: *This is a place for me. I matter here. I can be myself here. I can thrive here.*

My hope is that this strategy ignites our shared purpose and reminds us of the difference we can make—one child, one family, one school community at a time. Thank you to every partner who has contributed to its development and who continues to work tirelessly for our children and young people.



Let us move forward with ambition, compassion and unwavering belief in what is possible for the children of Leicestershire. Because when we do, belonging stops being an aspiration and becomes a lived, powerful reality - ensuing no-one is left behind – with life being about what each child or young person can be; not about where or how their journey began.

Tim Browne

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Introduction

One of the most cited definitions of Belonging arrives from Goodenow and Grady, who term it as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80)

In Leicestershire we want all our children and young people to feel a sense of belonging in Education, so they can live their best lives and be the author of their own life stories.

When children start their educational journey, social communities have a powerful impact on shaping their future. Extensive national research (Allen, KA., 2025a, 2025b; Allen et al., 2018a, 2018b; Basarkod et al., 2024a, 2024b; Korpershoek et al., 2020) shows that children and young people who feel safe, valued, and cared for at school are more likely to achieve academically, build strong social connections, and develop a confident sense of belonging. In contrast, those who feel out of place often face unnecessary learning barriers and may experience significant feelings of alienation. The [Schools Week](#) article (2026) summarises why belonging is important and the cultural shift that needs to occur; *“Children show us belonging is simple. If we see them, hear them, know them and accept them for who they are, everything changes. And when that happens, they try, they learn, and they come back tomorrow. Not because of a sticker chart. But because they belong.”*

In the current climate, we have a responsibility to work together as partners to support children to gain a sense of belonging through inclusive practice and adapting our responses to new challenges. Recent research showed that 40% of children and young people do not feel a sense of belonging at school, and 15-year-olds in the UK report one of the lowest levels of life satisfaction across the 38 countries that form the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Ingram et al, 2023)

To develop a sense of belonging in school, children and young people need to feel accepted and valued for who they are and to be offered a curriculum that is accessible and designed to help all children and young people successfully learn. All our schools and educational settings need to work relentlessly to establish and maintain a community that has the determination and flexibility to ensure every



young person can thrive. We recognise that this work is particularly paramount for those with certain protected characteristics, which may include those with additional needs (Equality Act, 2010). In addition to the protected characteristics, it is highly likely also to benefit those that have experiences trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences, as belonging is so integral to attachment theory as a strong social work theory that sets the foundations for positive relationships, health and wellbeing.

Leicestershire's Belonging in Education Strategy sets out how we aim to achieve this goal for every child and young person in all educational settings across Leicestershire.

This strategy is the framework to guide action planning at both a strategic Local Authority level and at an individual educational setting level. As such, the establishment of this strategy has been born out of a range of work with partners, including:

- Children and young people
- Parent and carers
- Schools
- Post 16 institutions
- Early Years providers
- Professional from across the system, including health, social care and the 'Leicester Leicestershire and Rutland SEND and Inclusion Alliance'

Why is Belonging Important?

The belonging in education strategy is embedded in Leicestershire's Trauma-Informed Relationship Policy. The policy is entrenched in strong relationships being the foundation of a successful school, where all learners are valued, included and respected

As school and educational providers are fundamentally institutions; their impact depends on those who form their communities—the students, their families, staff members, and leadership. The approaches leaders take in thinking, decision-making, action, reflection, and application of expertise to develop strategic directions are vital to the well-being of both students and adults within the school environment.

Belonging is underpinned by how children and young people feel, and is often unseen, so ensuring opportunities to gather children and young people voice is paramount.

Key aspects of belonging in education include:

- **Feeling accepted and respected:** children and young people feel valued for who they are and respected holistically.
- **Feeling included:** children and young people feel like they are part of the school and wider community and that their contributions are valued.
- **Feeling supported:** children and young people feel that they have the resources and support they need to succeed academically and socially.
- **Feeling safe:** children feel physically and emotionally safe in the school environment.
- **Strong relationships:** positive relationships with teachers and peers are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging.

Using experiences of other Local Areas and the vast array of academic reading (Allen et al., 2021; Chenge et al., 2021; Solomon, 1996), we understand that enabling a child and young person to feel a sense of belonging is likely to improve:

- **Academic achievement.** A sense of belonging can positively impact student motivation, academic performance, and retention.

- **Social-emotional development.** Belonging can promote positive self-esteem, reduced anxiety, and improved mental health.
- **Increase attendance and presence.** Children and young people who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to attend school regularly and stay in school.
- **Positive classroom environment.** Belonging can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable taking risks and expressing themselves.

Fostering belonging in educational settings involves building strong relationships between staff and children and young people and facilitating opportunities for peer and friendships to blossom. Establishing a safe and inclusive environment is essential to ensure that every child and young person feels physically and emotionally secure, with their voices heard and respected.

Providing access to academic and social resources further supports children and young people throughout their educational journey. It is also important to celebrate diversity by recognising and appreciating the unique abilities and perspectives that each individual contributes.

Promoting positive behaviour entails supporting and acknowledging constructive actions while addressing challenges in a thoughtful manner. To cultivate a sense of belonging across the entire educational community, institutions should embed relationship-centred policies, assist children and young people struggling with attendance in forming trusting relationships with staff, and maintain consistent routines that reinforce safety and support.

Encouraging participation in activities outside the classroom such as sports or the arts, in addition to offering students the opportunity to propose new clubs, can further



enhance engagement. Constructive peer relationships can be promoted through mentoring and collaborative group work, while diversity may be honoured through multicultural events, inclusive curricula, and the display of diverse materials within classrooms.



When fostering a sense of belonging, leaders and staff are encouraged to consider whether all individuals, including children and young people, flourish in every setting or if some may face challenges or feel overlooked within certain areas of the provision. If such issues exist, it is imperative for leaders and staff to identify and implement changes that ensure belonging becomes an intentional practice rather than an incidental outcome.

Ofsted Inspection Framework

The sense of belonging is explicitly part of the new Ofsted inspection framework (November 2025), which focuses on the refrain of 'Achieve, Belong, Thrive'; the triad emphasising that academic achievement, attendance and behaviour is tied to feeling valued and connected to the school community.

For the first time, belonging isn't implied — it's explicitly part of the inspection lens. Inspectors will consider whether pupils:

- feel valued
- feel safe
- feel part of the community
- contribute and are heard

Inspectors, under the new framework, will look for evidence of a culture of belonging, not just written policies. This includes analysing pupil/staff voice, attendance data, and how well schools tackle barriers for, SEND, or, disadvantaged, pupils.



Vision, Ethos and Principles



Our Priorities

Working in partnership with schools, professionals, parent and carers and children and young people, we will bring to life the Vision, Ethos and Principles, through four key priority areas. These priorities will help to shape how we can work together to embed a sense of belonging in education for all children and young people. These priorities were born out of co-production with partners.

Priority 1

Every Child and Young Person has a sense of belonging in the Education setting they attend

Priority 2

Building Relationships as Foundations

Priority 4

Schools feel equipped to support, especially when a sense of belonging breaks down and can reach out for appropriate external support, when needed.

Priority 3

Schools and professionals ensure children and young people feel autonomy and the authors of their own life stories.



Belonging
Priorities

Priority 1

Every Child and Young Person has a sense of belonging in the education settings they attend.

As dictated by the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC), Article 28, every child and young person is entitled to an education and for this education to be positive.

The national direction of travel, as detailed in the Education Reforms '[Every Child Achieving and Thriving](#)' (2026), emphasises that children and young people should, wherever possible, be educated as part of their community in their local mainstream school or setting.

Establishing a supportive learning environment in which children and young people feel secure and valued helps to address foundational needs, including those related to belonging and self-esteem. When this is achieved, children and young people can be the best versions of themselves and live their best lives.

Deliverables:

- The Local Authority will provide a self-assessment for all educational provisions to understand their provision and support for those that may need additional interventions within their environment. This will be in place from the start of the 26/27 academic year and will be evidenced within educational providers Self Evaluation Framework (SEF), depicting how provisions know children and young people belong, focussing on opportunities to capture the voice.
- The Local Authority will work with school and educational leaders to develop an agreed suite of assessments for use in schools and settings to assess the needs of young people.
- Schools in Leicestershire will work with partners to reduce in year transfers wherever possible. This will be monitored from 26/27 academic year.
- School Leaders and Local Authority will work collaboratively to develop a robust approach to the practice of part-time timetables to ensure appropriate and time-limited use to support entitlement to full time education. Part-time timetables will be supportively explored with parent carers before agreement.
- The Local Authority will introduce and implement 'Universal Design for Learning', as a practical tool to support belonging in educational provisions.

Outcomes:

- Reduction in fixed term exclusions and permanent exclusions.
- Reduction of in year transfers between schools.
- Increase number of children in school full time.

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Priority 2

Building relationships as foundations.

Maslow (1943), highlights belonging as a fundamental need to be fulfilled. Positive relationships within schools and communities and between local areas ensures effective support for all children and young people.

Humans have a core social motive to engage in positive interactions with others. These interactions should occur within a framework of mutual consideration and respect (Baumeister et al, 1995). As a system we need to work collaboratively to get it right for children and young people.

Deliverables:

- All system partners will actively oppose discrimination, ensuring all voices are heard and acted upon. This work continues to be a priority.
- School leaders will develop a whole school training approach which builds on positive relationships, so every child and young person feels like they have a 'champion'.
- Build confidence and collaboration amongst all system partners.
- School staff will engage in open and transparent communications with parent carers, ensuring effective collaboration to improve children and young people's outcomes and lived experience.
- School leaders will ensure a quality supervision framework is in place to supervise all staff, to reflect on supportive networks. Staff should feel respected and valued, demonstrating long lasting concern for each other's welfare.
- Relationships between all staff and children and young people is embedded in the expectation that staff prioritise building relationships and restoring relationships where those have broken down.

Outcomes:

- Collaboration among partners and with families improve.
- Leicestershire maintains a transparent communication strategy for consistent messaging on inclusion and education.
- Families trust that the education system works together in their best interests.

- Voice and Lived Experience is collated meaningfully at every opportunity to understanding children and young people and their family's sense of belonging and to shape future developments.

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Priority 3

Schools and professionals ensure children and young people feel autonomy and the authors of their own life stories.

Fostering a sense of autonomy can not only build independence for children and young people, but it also pushes children and young people to understand that their choices and actions have outcomes, that they are responsible for. Autonomy has direct routes into fostering a sense of belonging for both children and young people and for educational providers (Ryan and Deci, 2000, 2017).

Learning, understanding, and expressing independence are significant steps to feel autonomous. Professionals must continue to work with and listen to the educational providers as they too need to have a sense of autonomy to be able to support all children and young people to feel a sense of belonging.

Deliverables:

- All partners will develop a co-ordinated approach to working across families and children and young people, to understand family networks and engage families to support.
- The Local Authority will develop and, with support from school leaders, will embed a community-based approach, using community resources to support interventions in schools and settings.
- All partners will develop language and confidence from an early stage, including appropriately gathering voice so children and young people feel seen and heard and that their opinions matter.
- School leaders will develop sharing of best practice between phases and key transition points, with a particular focus on readiness for the next phase and mirroring successful learnings from the previous phase.
- School leaders will develop better transfer of key information between services and educational providers to ensure, wherever possible, families and children and young people are having to tell their story once.

Outcomes:

- There is evidence in educational plans of being responsive to child and young person voice and the impact of this voice is clearly both referenced and measured.

- Ensure families and family networks are involved, wherever appropriate, to help support holistically and to support that sense of autonomy
- Have a robust sharing agreement across professionals and phases of Education
- 'Shaping SEND Futures' is used as a community-based support and practice from across the locality.

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Priority 4

Schools feel equipped to offer timely support, especially when a sense of belonging breaks down and can reach out for appropriate external support, when needed.

While most priorities focus on helping young people succeed in mainstream schools, there is a small group whose sense of belonging breaks down or whose needs require more support than a mainstream setting may be able to provide without holistic support. It's important to make sure that high-quality, suitable support is available for schools, and that appropriate alternatives are offered when necessary.

Appropriate external support can include Early Years Inclusion and Childcare services, Virtual Schools, Inclusion services, Public Health, Health support through Leicestershire Partnership Trust, teaching school hubs, English/maths hubs, governor support, Education Effectiveness, Specialist Teaching services, Educational Psychology and Oakfield outreach, amongst others.

Deliverables:

- Alternative Specialist Task Force to be in place, to support at first signs of escalation. This may be through existing forums such as Oakfield or more locality-based support models. This aligns to 'Experts at Hand' model, as detailed in the Education Reforms: Every Child Achieving and Thriving.
- Review and develop alternative provision for those with high levels of anxiety who struggle in a mainstream environment.
- Deliver a bespoke offer, which may include the use of alternative provision (AP), to reduce escalations.
- Carefully consider how, with the use of alternative provision, children and young people can still feel a sense of belonging, especially for those arrangements that are not hybrid. Schools to use a range of techniques through, for example, letters, videos and regular contact to bridge the gap for children and young people accessing an AP and then focussing on rebuilding their sense of belonging on return back to school environment.
- Facilitate and invite schools to share approaches to Alternative Provisions, with opportunities to describe their provisions under defined headings and to facilitate sharing of best practice through learning visits between schools.

- The Local Authority have a commitment to listen to schools on what the support that is required and to ensure school staff are equal partners and integral to the solution.
- The Local Authority and school leaders will work collaboratively to facilitate interventions at the earliest opportunity.

Outcomes:

- New APST model being utilised to support children and young people at risk of escalation.
- Reduce suspensions and permanent exclusions through use of alternative approaches, including the development of in-house alternative provisions (tier 1 and 2).
- Appropriate alternative provisions to be shared with schools and feedback positive in their use. Time-limited access monitored to ensure children and young people can reintegrate and continue to develop a sense of belonging.

Implementation

Key Roles

Everyone within the system will have a role to play within implementing the 'Belonging in Education' strategy. All partners will engage in ongoing dialogue to proactively address potential barriers and ensure effective solutions remain a priority.

1. The Local Authority will:

- a. provide schools with school, locality and regional data to help schools and providers to monitor the implementation and impact of the strategy
- b. provide necessary support services where needed to ensure 'belonging' becomes integral in Leicestershire's educational landscape
- c. bring together all existing toolkits and resources in an accessible resource bank and embed the use of the ARC toolkit to enable schools to self-assess, supporting schools to implement and deliver the above priorities.
- d. review the training options to identify any gaps that could hinder the effective integration of belonging within educational settings and point schools and institutions toward relevant training provided by various partners, supporting both whole-school development and individual staff growth
- e. support schools with the delivery of the strategy through Universal Design for Learning.
- f. align policies and procedures to belonging as the overall strategy in Education.
- g. continue to work in collaboration with the LLR SEND and Inclusion Alliance to ensure aligned commissioning arrangements and Shaping SEND Futures as a community-based practice continues to develop.

2. Schools/educational providers will:

- a. embed a culture of belonging in their schools/provisions to enable staff and children and young people to take risks, speak honestly, ask for help, and try again after they fall short.
- b. self-assess and plan for improvements
- c. seek support and help when needed
- d. be open for change and working collaboratively across the system.
- e. collaborate with parent carers to help pupils reconnect after being away, including:

- i. Maintain regular contact through email, video calls, or phone with a key staff member.
- ii. Share updates about school events to keep children engaged.
- iii. Supporting attendance at school/provisions to enable children and young people to maintain friendships.

3. Parent/Carers will:

- a. make sure that their children of compulsory school age receive efficient full-time education that is suitable to the child's age, ability and aptitude and to any additional needs the child may have (Section 7 of the Education Act, 1996).
- b. work collaboratively with school staff and professionals to ensure their children have the best opportunity to feel a sense of belonging.
- c. communicate effectively and appropriately with their children to ensure they understand their child's wishes to support their autonomy.

How will we know the Strategy is working?

Monitoring success measures ensures we achieve our key objectives as a system.

The expected benefits of implementing this strategy will be to:

- Children and young people first and foremost tell us they belong. The Local Authority will work with educational providers to understand the best way to capture this voice in a meaningful way.
- Children and young people feel a sense of belonging in their educational setting, which will in turn improve:
 - Academic achievement
 - Social-emotional development
 - Absenteeism and dropout rates
 - Positive classroom environment
- Schools and educational providers feel supported to implement the strategy and supported when the sense of belonging breaks down.
- There is increased partnership between schools and educational providers and parent/carers.
- The use of data to understand the implementation of the strategy

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