

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 a shared and explicit commitment to belonging across all education settings.

All children and young people, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and additional vulnerabilities, will feel a strong and sustained sense of belonging in education so they can live their best lives.

This strategy sets clear expectations for schools, partners and the Local Authority to consistently deliver inclusive, relational practice and to be accountable for impact. It establishes a shared framework for how we work together to ensure every child and young person is seen, heard, valued and supported.



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

Director of Education, Inclusion and Additional Needs

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/carers and children and young people, we will deliver this strategy through four priority areas.

Across all priorities, the following principles apply:

- Inclusion, particularly for children and young people with SEND, is central to all practice
- Relational, trauma-informed approaches are consistently applied across settings
- Children, young people and parent/carer voice actively informs decision-making
- Partnership working is a shared responsibility across education, health and care

Priority 1

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

Priority 2

Building Relationships as Foundations



**Belonging
Priorities**

Priority 3

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

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 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.

What this means in practice?

All children and young people experience inclusive environments where they feel safe, valued and able to thrive. This includes a strong focus on ensuring children and young people with SEND are successfully included within their local setting wherever possible.

Deliverables:

Schools and educational providers will:

- Provide inclusive provision that meets a wide range of needs, including through Universal Design for Learning
- Complete and maintain a self-assessment of belonging and inclusion within their SEF from 2026/27 onwards
- Reduce in-year transfers wherever possible and evidence this through local monitoring

- Ensure full-time education is the default entitlement, with part-time timetables used only appropriately and time-limited
- Demonstrate how children and young people's voice is captured and informs provision

The Local Authority will:

- Provide a standardised self-assessment framework and locality-level data to support evaluation
- Work with schools to develop consistent approaches to assessing need and inclusive practice
- Support the implementation of Universal Design for Learning across the system
- Monitor key indicators at locality and system level to support improvement

How will we measure success?

- Reduction in fixed term and permanent exclusions, including for pupils with SEND
- Reduction in in-year transfers
- Increase in the number of children accessing full-time education
- Evidence of inclusive practice and belonging within school self-evaluation and inspection

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.

What this means in practice

All settings adopt a consistent, relational and trauma-informed approach, ensuring children, young people and families experience strong, respectful and trusting relationships across all interactions.

Deliverables:

Schools and educational providers will:

- Embed a whole-school relational approach across policies, practice and culture
- Ensure all staff apply consistent approaches to behaviour, attendance and inclusion
- Implement training for staff to support relational and trauma-informed practice
- Ensure relational practice is SEND-informed, recognising differences in communication, sensory needs and social interaction
- Maintain open, regular and transparent communication with parent/carers

The Local Authority will:

- Provide guidance and training to support consistent relational practice across settings

- Align policies and frameworks to support a relational approach
- Support workforce development, including supervision and staff wellbeing
- Ensure consistency of approach across localities and services

How we will measure success

- Improved feedback from children, young people and families on relationships with schools
- Increased consistency in approaches across settings
- Improved collaboration and trust between families and professionals

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.

What this means in practice

Children, young people and parent/carers are actively involved in decision-making at individual, setting and system level. Approaches are inclusive and accessible, particularly for children and young people with SEND.

Deliverables:

Schools and educational providers will:

- Implement structured approaches to capturing and responding to child and parent/carer voice
- Ensure children and young people with SEND can communicate their views using appropriate and adapted methods
- Demonstrate how feedback from children and families influences decisions and provision
- Ensure effective information sharing so families do not need to repeatedly share their story
- Support children and young people to develop autonomy and independence

The Local Authority will:

- Support the development of consistent approaches to capturing voice across the system
- Embed co-production within strategy delivery and evaluation
- Ensure community-based approaches support families and networks
- Align this work with SEND reforms and locality-based models

How we will measure success

- Evidence that children and young people's voice influences planning and provision
- Increased participation of children with SEND in decision-making
- Positive feedback from children, young people and families on being heard

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.

What this means in practice

Schools and partners work together through clear, locality-based arrangements to provide early, coordinated and effective support. This ensures needs are identified and addressed promptly, particularly for children and young people with SEND.

Deliverables:

Schools and educational providers will:

- Access support at the earliest opportunity through agreed pathways
- Engage actively in locality forums and partnership working
- Work collaboratively with external services to support children and families
- Maintain a sense of belonging for children accessing alternative provision

The Local Authority will:

- Publish clear pathways for accessing support, including thresholds and referral routes

- Establish or strengthen locality-based forums to support joint planning and decision-making
- Ensure services operate with clear expectations, including response times
- Work in partnership with schools as equal partners with shared accountability
- Align external support with SEND reform and inclusion priorities

How we will measure success

- Increased school confidence in accessing support
- Improved timeliness of interventions
- Reduced escalation to specialist provision
- Reduction in exclusions and improved reintegration outcomes

Implementation

Governance and Voice

Children, young people and parent/carers will play an active role in governance and implementation of this strategy.

- Representation will be embedded within key governance groups
- Structured feedback mechanisms will inform decision-making and evaluation
- Evidence will be required to demonstrate how feedback has influenced change
- Co-production will underpin ongoing development and review

Key Roles

All partners are expected to participate in structured locality and strategic forums, share relevant data, and jointly plan and review support for children and young people. 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.

- The Local Authority will:
 - Provide clear frameworks, tools and expectations for implementation
 - Monitor delivery and impact at system and locality level
 - Provide data and intelligence to inform local planning
 - Ensure alignment with SEND reform and inclusion priorities
 - Support workforce development and access to services
- Schools/educational providers will:
 - 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.

- o Evidence implementation through self-evaluation and improvement planning
 - o Participate actively in partnership and locality working
 - o Ensure relational and inclusive practice is consistently applied
- Parent/Carers will:
 - o 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).
 - o Work in partnership with schools and professionals
 - o Support children and young people to engage with education
 - o Contribute their views to support improvement and development

How will we know the Strategy is working?

Monitoring success measures ensures we achieve our key objectives as a system. Success will be measured through a balanced framework of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

This includes:

- Impact for children and young people with SEND. 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.
- Attendance, exclusions and transition data
- Feedback from children, young people and parent/carers
- Evidence of inclusive and relational practice in settings

Children, young people and parent/carers will routinely inform evaluation of the strategy and demonstrate measurable influence on decisions made across the system.

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