



INCLUSION **STRATEGY**

Rivers & Little Rivers ESC



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PURPOSE AND STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Part 1 – The Case for Inclusion at Rivers Education Support Centre

"Inclusion is not determined by where a child is educated, but by whether they are enabled to belong, participate and achieve."

At Rivers Education Support Centre (Rivers ESC), we believe that every child and young person deserves an education in which they feel safe, respected, understood and able to succeed. Inclusion is not viewed as an additional initiative or a discrete area of school improvement; it is the foundation upon which every aspect of our provision is built. It shapes our relationships, informs our decision-making and influences the way we design learning, respond to behaviour, work alongside families and prepare pupils for their next stage of education.

As an Alternative Provision serving pupils across Key Stages 1–4, we recognise that many children arrive at Rivers following experiences of significant challenge within education. Some have experienced repeated suspensions or are at risk of permanent exclusion. Others have found mainstream education increasingly difficult to access due to social, emotional and mental health needs, neurodivergence, unmet learning needs, adverse childhood experiences, emotionally based school avoidance, or circumstances beyond their control. For many, confidence in education has diminished long before they walk through our doors.

We therefore understand inclusion differently from many educational settings. Our role is not simply to provide an alternative location in which pupils complete schoolwork. Instead, our purpose is to rebuild trust, restore belonging and create the conditions in which children can once again experience themselves as successful learners. This requires a provision that is relational, evidence-informed and ambitious, where barriers are identified without limiting aspirations, and where every interaction contributes towards improved educational outcomes and personal development.

Although Alternative Provision is not currently required to publish a formal Inclusion Strategy, Rivers ESC has chosen to do so voluntarily. We believe that inclusion should be visible, transparent and accountable. This strategy provides a clear articulation of our inclusive philosophy, the evidence that informs our practice and the systems through which we seek to remove barriers to learning for every pupil. It also demonstrates our commitment to continuous improvement and to contributing positively to the wider educational community within Hertfordshire.

This document is not intended to be a static policy. Rather, it is a strategic framework that will evolve alongside emerging evidence, local priorities and the changing needs of the children and young people we serve. It reflects our commitment to reflective practice, professional curiosity and a culture in which inclusion is continually strengthened through collaboration, evaluation and learning.

WHY RIVERS ESC HAS DEVELOPED AN INCLUSION STRATEGY

The national conversation around inclusion is changing. Increasingly, schools are being encouraged to demonstrate not only how they support pupils with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), but how they create environments in which all learners can participate meaningfully in education. The publication of the Education Endowment Foundation's guidance on Inclusive Teaching, alongside wider developments in national SEND reform, places renewed emphasis on early identification of need, ordinarily available provision, adaptive practice and whole-school inclusion as the responsibility of every member of staff.

For mainstream schools, this expectation is becoming increasingly explicit through the introduction of published Inclusion Strategies linked to the Inclusive Mainstream Funding programme. *While these requirements do not apply directly to Alternative Provision, the principles that underpin them are equally relevant.* Indeed, there is a compelling argument that they are particularly relevant within specialist and alternative settings, where pupils often present with multiple interacting needs and where inclusive practice must be intentional, consistent and evidence-informed.

Rivers ESC has therefore chosen to publish this strategy because we believe inclusion should not be defined by statutory obligation but by professional responsibility. As educators, we have a duty to ensure that every child experiences dignity, belonging and ambitious opportunities to succeed, regardless of the barriers they may have encountered previously. Publishing this strategy enables us to articulate that commitment clearly to pupils, families, commissioners, partner schools, governors and the wider community.

It also reflects our aspiration to be recognised not simply as a provider of alternative education, but as a centre of excellence for inclusive practice. By making our strategic approach explicit, we seek to promote consistency across our provision, strengthen accountability and provide a shared framework that supports decision-making at every level of the organisation.



THE PURPOSE OF THIS STRATEGY

This Inclusion Strategy has four interconnected purposes.

First, it establishes a shared understanding of what inclusion means within the context of Rivers ESC. Inclusion is often interpreted narrowly as the placement of pupils with additional needs within educational settings. Our experience tells us that genuine inclusion extends far beyond physical presence. It is reflected in the quality of relationships, the accessibility of learning, the responsiveness of teaching, the culture of belonging and the extent to which every pupil feels recognised as a valued member of the school community.

Second, the strategy provides a coherent framework for decision-making. It explains how evidence, assessment, professional expertise and pupil voice inform the development of inclusive systems, ensuring that practice is consistent across key stages and responsive to individual need.

Third, it strengthens accountability. By setting out our principles, expectations and intended outcomes, we create a clear benchmark against which leaders, governors and external partners can evaluate the effectiveness of our provision and identify priorities for improvement.

Finally, the strategy demonstrates our commitment to continual development. Inclusion is not a destination that can be achieved once and maintained indefinitely. It requires ongoing reflection, adaptation and professional learning. As the educational landscape evolves and new evidence emerges, Rivers ESC will continue to refine its practice to ensure that every child receives the highest quality educational experience possible.

Looking Ahead

This strategy continues by exploring the national evidence base for inclusive practice and explaining how Rivers ESC translates research into day-to-day provision and our inclusion framework.

THE CHANGING NATIONAL LANDSCAPE OF INCLUSION

Inclusion has become one of the defining priorities within education. National policy, inspection frameworks and educational research increasingly recognise that successful inclusion cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or specialist provision alone. Instead, inclusion is understood as the collective responsibility of all educational professionals, requiring leadership, curriculum design, high-quality teaching, meaningful relationships and a culture in which every child feels that they belong.

This shift reflects an important change in thinking. Historically, inclusion has often been associated primarily with pupils who have identified Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Whilst statutory duties towards pupils with SEND remain fundamental, contemporary evidence demonstrates that many barriers to learning are shared across groups of learners. Pupils experiencing social, emotional and mental health needs, disadvantage, trauma, interrupted education, attendance difficulties, neurodivergence or family adversity may all require adaptations that enable them to access learning successfully.

For Alternative Provision, this understanding is particularly significant. Rivers ESC supports pupils whose educational experiences have frequently been characterised by multiple interacting barriers rather than a single identified need. Many pupils arrive with overlapping profiles including unmet SEND, disrupted learning, low attendance, emotional distress, reduced confidence and fractured relationships with education. Consequently, inclusion cannot be viewed solely through the lens of diagnosis or statutory entitlement. It must instead focus on identifying and removing barriers to participation, learning and belonging for every individual.

The strategic challenge for Rivers ESC is therefore not simply to respond to additional needs but to create an educational environment where inclusive practice is embedded so consistently that it becomes the expected experience for every pupil.

INCLUSION WITHIN ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Rivers ESC operates within the national framework for alternative provision and therefore occupies a distinctive position within the education system.

Rivers ESC provides short-term intervention for pupils whose needs cannot currently be met successfully within their usual educational setting. Placements are purposeful, time-limited and centred upon improving outcomes that enable successful reintegration or progression to an appropriate long-term provision. This creates unique opportunities and responsibilities.

Unlike many schools, Rivers ESC has the advantage of smaller class sizes, highly personalised support and flexible curriculum pathways. These factors create conditions in which staff can respond rapidly to changing need, develop strong relationships and implement individualised support.

However, Alternative Provision must guard against becoming defined solely by intervention. If support is focused exclusively on addressing presenting behaviours without strengthening teaching, relationships, belonging and learner identity, improvements may not be sustained when pupils return to larger educational environments.

For this reason, Rivers ESC views every placement as an opportunity to strengthen the protective factors that support lifelong educational engagement rather than simply managing immediate difficulties.

Our work is therefore underpinned by three interconnected ambitions:

- rebuilding engagement with learning;
- developing confidence, self-regulation and resilience;
- preparing pupils for successful participation beyond Rivers ESC.

This strategic perspective informs every aspect of the provision described throughout this strategy.

INCLUSION IN THE CURRICULUM AT RIVERS ESC

Our curriculum is therefore designed to develop both academic progress and personal development. Alongside subject knowledge, pupils are supported to strengthen emotional regulation, resilience, communication, executive functioning, self-reflection and readiness to learn. Staff recognise that these competencies are essential foundations for successful participation within education, employment and wider society.

Reintegration planning begins from the point of admission rather than at the end of placement. Families, commissioning schools and external professionals are engaged throughout the placement to ensure that strategies developed within Rivers ESC can be sustained within future educational environments. This collaborative approach supports continuity, reduces unnecessary disruption and increases the likelihood of successful long-term outcomes.



THE SEND CODE OF PRACTICE: A GRADUATED APPROACH

The SEND Code of Practice (2015) establishes the expectation that educational settings identify, assess and respond to pupils' needs through a graduated approach. This process is commonly described through the Assess – Plan – Do – Review cycle, or more accurately at Rivers ESC: Identify > Understand > Support > Review > Transition, which encourages schools to evaluate provision continuously rather than viewing support as fixed.

At Rivers ESC, this principle extends beyond statutory SEND processes.

Every pupil benefits from an ongoing cycle of assessment and review regardless of whether they have an Education, Health and Care Plan or an identified special educational need. Staff recognise that needs may fluctuate during a placement and that barriers often become clearer as relationships develop.

Assessment therefore draws together multiple sources of information, including:

- referral documentation;
- information from mainstream schools;
- previous interventions;
- attendance and behaviour information;
- learning observations;
- baseline assessments;
- pupil voice;
- family perspectives;
- professional judgement.

This information informs personalised learning plans, adaptive teaching approaches and targeted support. Progress is reviewed regularly, allowing provision to evolve as pupils develop increased confidence, engagement and independence.

Rather than asking, "What support does this pupil qualify for?", staff are encouraged to ask, "What barriers currently exist and what evidence suggests is most likely to reduce them?"

This subtle difference reflects Rivers ESC's commitment to responsive, evidence-informed practice.

APDR at Rivers ESC

Identify > Understand > Support > Review > Transition

Assess (Identify)

Baseline assessments, analysis of Mainstream student information and observations of student

Plan (Understand)

Learning plans/targets are created within the first 1-2 weeks based on the student's information and baseline assessment results

Do (Support)

Deliver intervention/ adapted lessons/ individual targets

Review

An initial review of the targets is made with the key staff involved after 1 week of the learning plan being in place

A mid placement review will be made (around 6 weeks for KS3 and 6 weeks for those on long term placements at KS4 and 8 weeks for Little Rivers) which will include input from key staff

Repeat Assess, Plan, Do steps

Final Review (Transition)

A final review will be made (11-12 weeks for KS3/4 and 14-16 weeks for Little Rivers) which will include input from key staff.

All information will be compiled and form part of the SEND reintegration support package for the student's next/returning setting/school.

THE EDUCATION ENDOWMENT FOUNDATION (EEF): INCLUSIVE TEACHING

The publication of the Education Endowment Foundation's Inclusive Teaching guidance represents an important development in educational research. Rather than presenting inclusion as an additional programme, the guidance demonstrates that the greatest improvements in outcomes occur when high-quality teaching is designed to be accessible for the widest possible range of learners from the outset.

This principle aligns closely with Rivers ESC's philosophy.

The EEF identifies several characteristics of effective inclusive teaching, including:

- maintaining high expectations for all learners;
- explicitly teaching new knowledge and skills;
- reducing unnecessary cognitive load;
- using effective scaffolding;
- supporting metacognitive thinking;
- providing timely, purposeful feedback;
- creating predictable learning environments;
- using assessment to inform teaching;
- adapting instruction without lowering ambition.

These principles are not viewed as separate initiatives within Rivers ESC. They form the foundation upon which classroom practice is built.

Targeted interventions remain valuable, particularly for pupils with significant literacy, communication or emotional regulation needs. However, interventions are most effective when they enhance high-quality classroom teaching rather than replace it. This distinction is particularly important within Alternative Provision, where time is limited and the quality of everyday interactions has a significant influence on long-term outcomes.



TRANSLATING EVIDENCE INTO PRACTICE AT RIVERS ESC

Rivers ESC is committed to ensuring that educational practice is informed by robust evidence whilst remaining responsive to the unique strengths and needs of individual pupils. Research provides an important foundation for decision-making; however, effective inclusion depends upon the thoughtful application of evidence through professional expertise, reflective practice and collaborative working.

Adaptive teaching forms the foundation of classroom practice. Staff carefully sequence learning, provide explicit instruction, reduce unnecessary cognitive load and use scaffolded approaches that enable pupils to access ambitious learning whilst developing increasing independence. Lessons are characterised by predictable routines, clear expectations and purposeful modelling, reducing uncertainty and supporting pupils who may experience difficulties with executive functioning, working memory or information processing.

Assessment is used diagnostically rather than simply as a measure of attainment. Information gathered through baseline assessments, observations, learning plans, pupil voice, PASS, literacy and numeracy assessments and professional discussion informs planning and enables staff to identify barriers at an early stage. Provision is reviewed regularly to ensure that support evolves alongside the pupil's progress. Relationships remain central to effective practice. Staff recognise that learning is strengthened when pupils experience trust, consistency and emotional safety.

TRANSLATING EVIDENCE INTO PRACTICE AT RIVERS ESC (CON'TD)

Restorative conversations, mentoring, predictable routines and relational approaches contribute to creating environments where pupils feel confident to participate, take risks in learning and develop resilience following setbacks.

Universal provision is prioritised before targeted intervention. All pupils benefit from high-quality adaptive teaching, structured routines, clear communication and supportive classroom environments. Where additional support is required, interventions complement rather than replace classroom learning. This reflects current evidence that targeted support is most effective when delivered alongside consistently high-quality teaching.

Professional development ensures that evidence-informed practice continues to evolve. Staff engage in ongoing training relating to, but not limited to, neurodiversity, adaptive teaching, communication, trauma-informed practice, executive functioning, behaviour as communication and inclusive classroom approaches.

Leaders monitor the implementation and impact of these approaches through quality assurance, learning walks, pupil voice, learning plan reviews and reintegration outcomes.

By combining statutory responsibilities, educational research and reflective professional practice, Rivers ESC seeks to create an inclusive provision in which every pupil is recognised as an individual, supported to overcome barriers and empowered to achieve ambitious outcomes.

Inclusion is therefore not viewed as a separate initiative but as the defining characteristic of how Rivers ESC leads, teaches and supports every child and young person.

UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS AT RIVERS ESC

At Rivers ESC, protective factors are intentionally developed through high-quality teaching, trusted relationships, consistent routines, emotionally safe environments and ambitious learning experiences.

This approach reflects a shift away from asking "What intervention does this pupil need?" towards asking "What conditions will enable this pupil to flourish?"

Potential Barrier to Learning	Potential Protective Factors	How Rivers ESC Responds
Interrupted education	Predictable routines, rapid re-engagement with learning	Individual learning plans, graduated reintegration, personalised curriculum pathways
Low self-esteem and repeated experiences of failure	Success, recognition, achievable challenge	High expectations, scaffolded learning, celebration of progress, strengths-based target setting
Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs	Trusted relationships, emotional safety, co-regulation	Key adult relationships, mentoring, restorative practice, emotional coaching and predictable routines
ADHD and executive functioning differences	Clear structure, reduced cognitive load, movement opportunities	Chunked instructions, visual timetables, movement breaks, sensory regulation, flexible recording methods
Autism and sensory processing differences	Predictability, explicit communication, reduced sensory overload	Visual supports, processing time, structured transitions, adapted environments and communication
Speech, Language and Communication Needs	Explicit language, modelling and repetition	Simplified language, pre-teaching vocabulary, visual supports, questioning adapted to developmental language level
Literacy and numeracy gaps	Carefully scaffolded teaching and overlearning	Adaptive teaching, precision teaching, targeted intervention alongside high-quality classroom practice
Trauma and adverse childhood experiences	Stable relationships, consistency and psychological safety	Trauma-informed practice, relational approaches, restorative conversations, calm environments
Poor attendance or emotionally based school avoidance	Positive relationships and a sense of belonging	Flexible reintegration planning, family partnership, attendance support and meaningful curriculum engagement
Previous exclusion or fractured relationships with education	Belonging, trust and positive learner identity	High aspirations, personalised support, opportunities for leadership and success, collaborative goal setting

Bringing Our Inclusion Strategy to Life - The Rivers Framework for Inclusive Practice



Flourish

Ultimately, inclusion is measured not by attendance at provision, but by long-term participation in education and society.

Flourishing represents the culmination of Rivers ESC's inclusive practice and remains the central purpose of every placement.



Learn

When pupils are emotionally regulated and experience positive relationships, they are more able to access ambitious learning.

In line with the Education Endowment Foundation's guidance, targeted interventions enhance—but never replace—high-quality classroom teaching.



Relate

Positive relationships provide the foundation upon which successful learning is built.

Relationships enable pupils to develop confidence, resilience and a renewed sense of identity as successful learners.



Regulate

Learning begins with emotional and physiological regulation.

Regulation is viewed as an educational priority rather than solely a pastoral concern.

The purpose is not to remove challenge, but to ensure pupils are ready to engage with it

BLOSSOMING

Being at school
Lonely people
On their own
Shouting voices all around
Sent away to a better place
On my own, but not for long
My new school
Is a life saver
Now I'm seen
Gotta keep going
and see where life takes me

-Callie, KS4