WHIZZ KIDZ

We're here for young wheelchair users

Making the grade

Making the Grade: The Whizz Kidz School Report

Foreword

Whizz Kidz is pleased to share this report following research undertaken by our Youth Board into the state of education for young wheelchair users across the UK.

Professionals across the sector, both in mainstream and SEND schools, as well as families and young people have responded to our request for evidence. Our Youth Board have led this research and shared their lived experiences alongside the data we have collected.

The report highlights areas of inequality in education between young wheelchair users and their non-disabled peers and makes recommendations for improvements that could be made to better support young people in both primary and secondary school. Recommendations include access and adjustment changes as well as training and development for those professionals who support young wheelchair users. Whizz Kidz welcomes the opportunity to open this conversation and calls on all those within the sector to support our recommendations and implement change.

Every young person has the right to a fair and equal education.

Sarah Pugh | Chief Executive

Three years ago, Youth Board launched our manifesto with four key focus areas including education, employment, access and travel/transport.

We are particularly passionate about education, and we all share different lived experiences through primary, secondary and higher education. There are differences in how young wheelchair users are supported in both mainstream and SEND schools, and we wanted to conduct our own research to enable us to make recommendations and ask for a change in policy.

We believe every young person has the right to inclusive and accessible education and that we can help that happen!

Whizz Kidz Youth Board

Introduction

Young wheelchair users do not always have the opportunity to achieve the same educational outcomes as their non-disabled peers, and we want this to change. We wanted to better understand school experiences, identify any gaps in support, and find ways to enhance inclusion for both young wheelchair users and schools.

To do this, the Whizz Kidz Youth Board developed two surveys - one for school colleagues and one for young wheelchair users. These surveys were designed to gather valuable insight, enabling us to understand the school experience from both perspectives and identify areas for improving inclusion.

Wheelchair accessibility and inclusivity are crucial to creating a supportive and equitable educational environment. This report focuses on practical lived experiences of school colleagues and young wheelchair users, and outlines recommendations that are as easy as A, B, C,

- **Accessibility: how inclusion and accessibility can be improved.**
- **Best Practices: what is currently being done that can be improved.**
- **Change: recommendations to start making education equitable for all.**

Whizz Kidz

Whizz Kidz is the UK's leading charity for the 75,000 young wheelchair users in the UK. Our vision is a society in which every young wheelchair user is mobile, enabled and included. We empower young wheelchair users by providing wheelchairs, supporting confidence-building experiences, and campaigning for a more inclusive society.

Whizz Kidz Youth Board

We are the Youth Board, and we are a group of young wheelchair users who are proud to each represent a different area of the UK. We meet up several times a year, in person and online. Our role is to ensure our voices, and the voices of young people from our areas, are at the heart of every decision Whizz Kidz makes. We are passionate about raising awareness about the issues that affect us every day and we campaign to make a real difference for all young wheelchair users.

Why focus on Education?

A key priority

The area of Education is a key priority for Whizz Kidz and the Youth Board, as set out in the Youth Board's manifesto. In 2023, we launched an A-Z of Going to University, a resource based on our research into Higher Education. This guide was made available to Disability Support Officers at each of the 158 universities in the UK. The Youth Board also presented at a Student Beans webinar to promote the A-Z and share their personal experiences of attending university as young wheelchair users. The project attracted the attention of Ministers and UCAS, who shared the guide across their platforms.

In 2024, we decided we wanted to focus on statutory education and how we can make the school experience better for young wheelchair users.

Context

Despite policy developments and initiatives such as the *Equality Act 2010*[1], the *Children and Families Act 2014*, marking the introduction of EHC Plans[2], and the *SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan 2023* in England[3], the *Additional Support for Learning Act 2004*[4] *and Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)*[5] in Scotland, and the *Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018*[6] and *The Equality Act 2010 (Disabled School Pupils) (Wales) Regulations 2021*[7] in Wales, young wheelchair users are still not achieving in line with their non-disabled peers.

Research and statistics repeatedly demonstrate that disability impacts negatively on education outcomes. One-quarter (24.9%) of disabled people aged 21 to 64 years in the UK had a degree as their highest qualification compared with 42.7% of non-disabled people; 13.3% of disabled people had no qualifications compared with 4.6% of non-disabled[8] and the proportion of 16-24 year olds who are NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) is higher for those with disabilities (28%) than those without (8%)[9].

Publicly funded education providers have a duty under the Equality Act not to discriminate against potential, current or former students[10], and have a duty to make

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[1] **Equality Act 2010**

[2] **Children and Families Act 2014**

[3] **SEND and alternative provision improvement plan - GOV.UK**

[4] **Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004**

[5] **Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) - gov.scot**

[6] **Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018**

[7] **Guidance: The Equality Act 2010 (Disabled School Pupils) (Wales) Regulations 2021 [HTML] | GOV.WALES**

[8] **Outcomes for disabled people in the UK - Office for National Statistics**

[9] **SN06705.pdf**

[10] **Understanding the Equality Act: information for disabled students | Disability Rights UK**

'reasonable adjustments' to make sure disabled students are not discriminated against. Local authorities also need to produce an accessibility strategy which identifies how strategic actions will improve access to education for disabled pupils[11]. In addition, pupils with a Statement of Special Educational Needs should their needs set out for them and an outline of how the Education Authority (EA) will meet those needs in an educational setting[12].

Despite these approaches, and others, disabled children and young people are still not achieving in line with their non-disabled peers. Whizz Kidz and the Youth Board want to narrow these gaps and improve the school experience, and the outcomes, for young wheelchair users.

Methodology

We wanted to hear about the experiences of young wheelchair users and colleagues working in schools. We also wanted to compare and contrast responses from both audiences to see where there were gaps or agreements. Therefore, the Youth Board designed two separate questionnaires; one for young wheelchairs users and one for those that work in schools. The questions in both surveys focussed on training, inclusion and work experience.

Where possible the same, or similar, questions were asked of both audiences, such as how accessible certain areas of the school are for young wheelchair users, to allow direct comparisons. Other questions were adapted to allow for indirect comparison, for example, young wheelchair users were asked if people that worked at their school spoke to them in a respectful way whereas school colleagues were asked if they knew the preferred terminology to use when talking to young wheelchair users. There were also some questions that were only relevant for either young wheelchair users or school colleagues.

While direct comparisons between the two audiences may not be made, as all respondents represent different schools in areas around the UK, the responses can be used comparatively in terms of being representative of the approaches, attitudes and lived experiences of each audience.

To ensure the responses we received were relevant, we limited responses to young wheelchair users, or parent/carers of young wheelchair users, currently aged between three and 18 years of age. For the school survey we invited responses from any role within the school. As young wheelchair users interact with different colleagues across the school, we felt it was important not to restrict responses to specific roles.

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[11] **Equality Act 2010 - Explanatory Notes**
[12] **3: What is a Statement? – The Special Educational Needs Advice Centre (SENAC)**

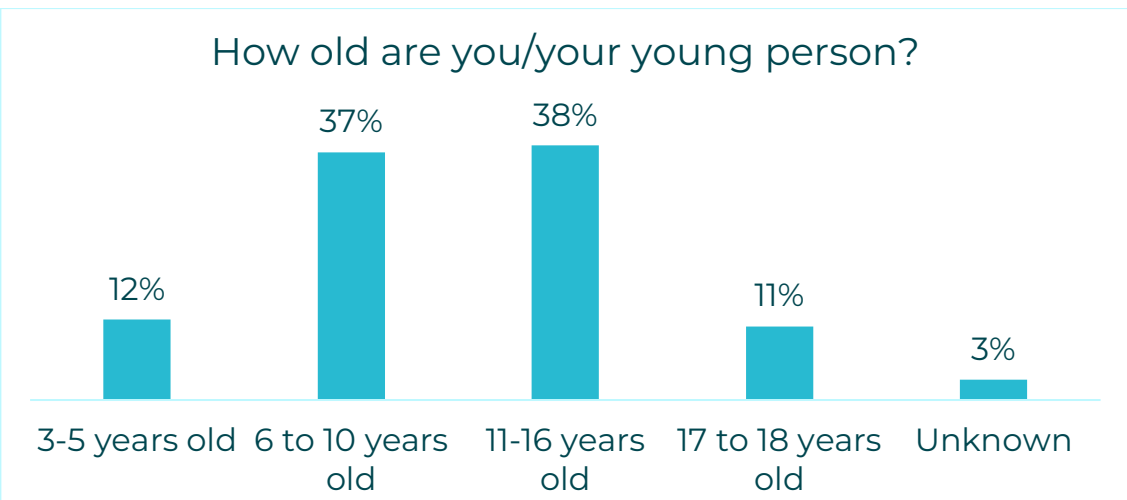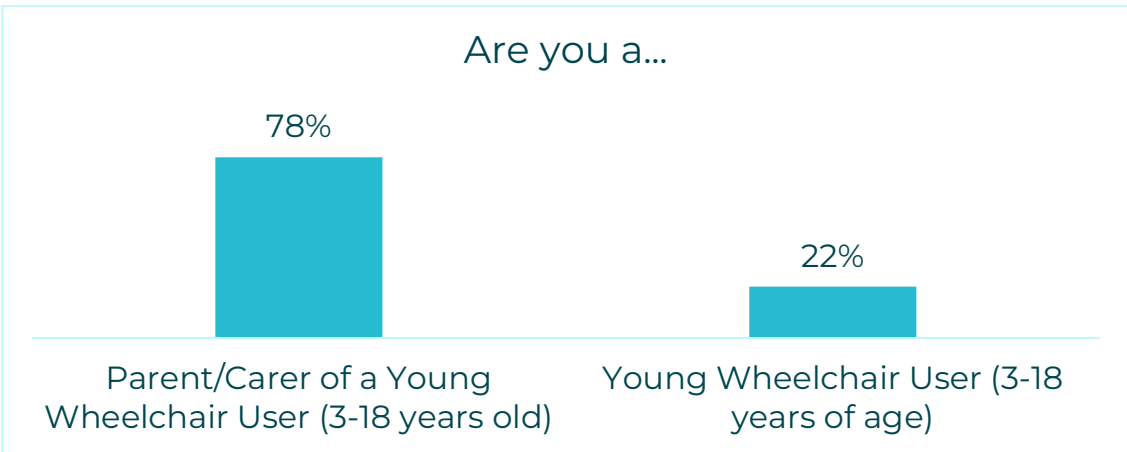The following were contacted with information about the project, receiving links to complete the surveys:

- All schools in England, Scotland and Wales
- Education departments in Local Authorities in England
- Whizz Kidz beneficiaries
- Partners and networks
- Ministers of Education in England, Scotland and Wales

In addition, we developed a webpage and social media campaign to support awareness of the project and encourage completions.

Who responded to the surveys?

Young wheelchair users

In total we received 93 completions of the young wheelchair user's survey.

Are you a...

78% — Parent/Carer of a Young Wheelchair User (3-18 years old)

22% — Young Wheelchair User (3-18 years of age)

How old are you/your young person?

3-5 years old	6 to 10 years old	11-16 years old	17 to 18 years old	Unknown
12%	37%	38%	11%	3%

Do you/they attend a SEN school?

Yes	No
22%	78%

Where do you live?

London (England)	North England	North Scotland	North Wales	South England	South Scotland	South Wales
10%	30%	2%	1%	43%	4%	9%
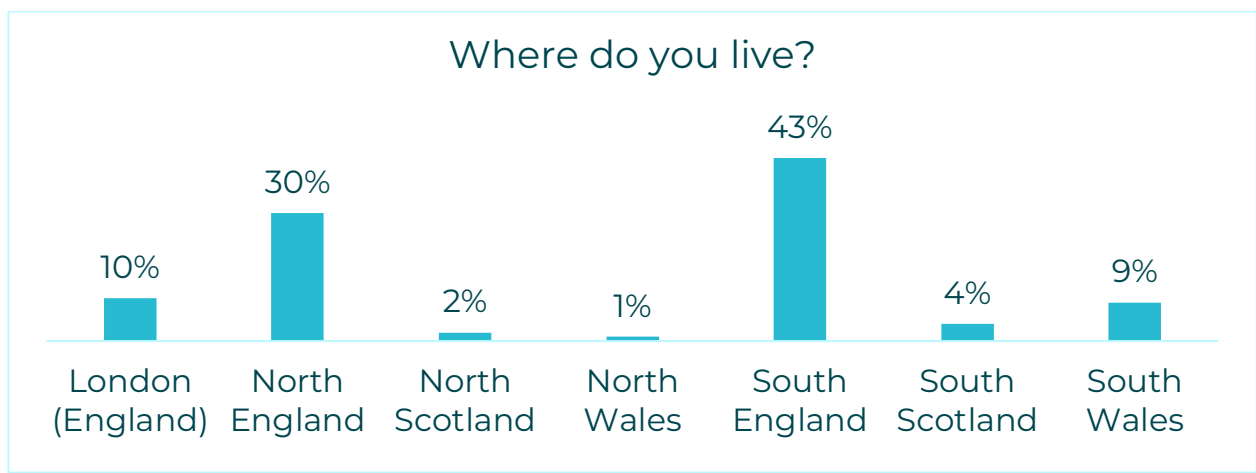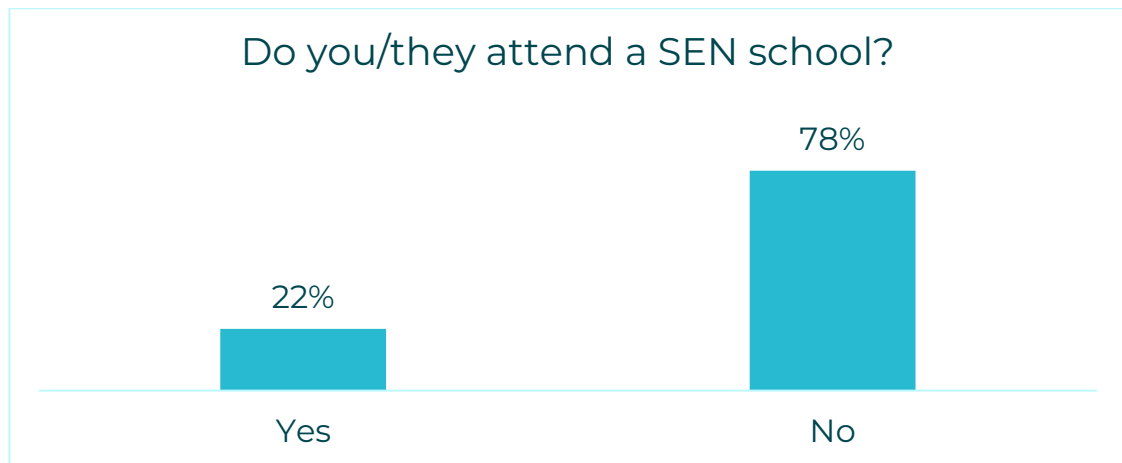
School colleague survey

In total we received 105 completions of the school colleague survey.

Is your school...

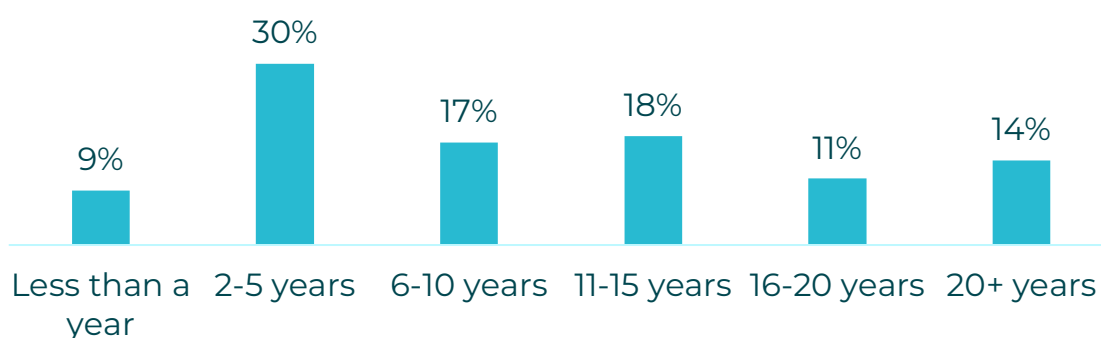| Mainstream	Mainstream with ALN Department	Special
78%	13%	9%
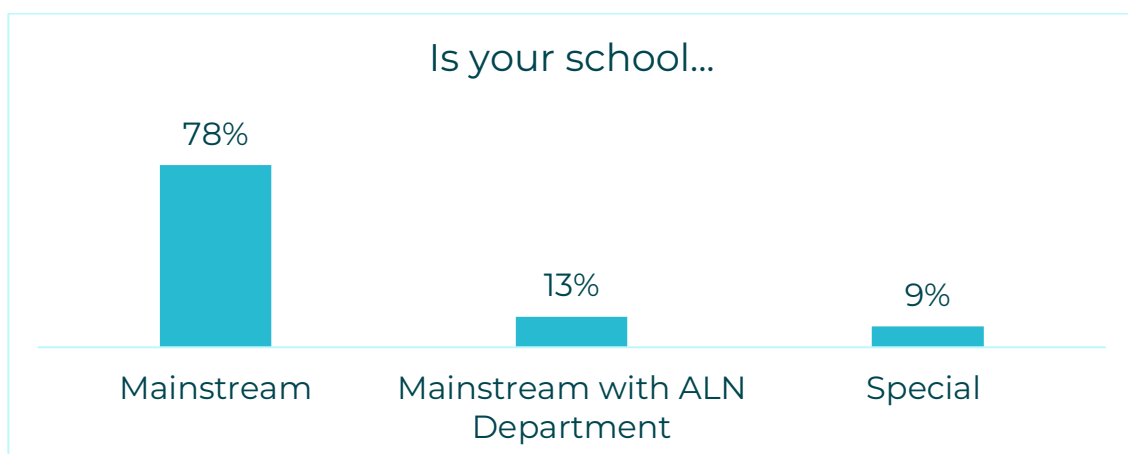
How long have you worked at the school?

Less than a year	2-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	20+ years
9%	30%	17%	18%	11%	14%

Where is your school located?

London (England)	North England	North Scotland	North Wales	South England	South Scotland	South Wales
10%	21%	0%	6%	56%	1%	6%
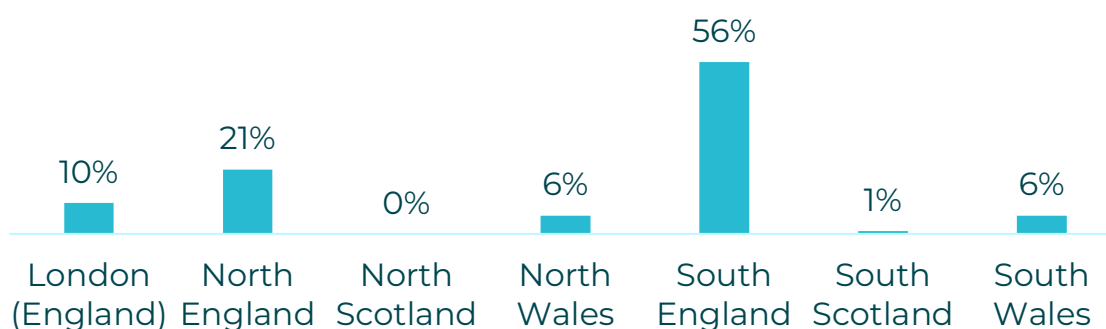
What is your job role?	Response
SENCO	41%
SENCO/SEND Team member*	20%
Assistant/Deputy Head Teacher	10%
Teaching Assistant/Higher Level Teaching Assistant	7%
Finance/Office Manager	4%
Business Manager	3%
Specialist Teacher (e.g. teacher for Visually Impaired/Physically Disabled)	3%
Other supply role	3%
Class Teacher	2%
Higher Level Teaching Assistant	2%
I am the resource base coordinator	1%
Mid-Day Supervisory Assistant	1%

What is your job role?	Response
Head of Department	1%
Head of Year Group	1%
Medical role e.g. physio, nurse etc...	1%
Pastoral care support role	1%

*These are respondents that outlined a role within the SENCO/SEND team alongside another role. This ranged from Head Teacher to Class Teacher to Head of Year.

The rest of this report outlines the responses given and, where applicable, compares the school experience of young wheelchair users with the experience of school colleagues.

Research findings

Training

This section of both surveys covered what training school colleagues had received and any gaps in relation to understanding and supporting young wheelchair users in schools. Only 57% of young wheelchair users said they have enough support from their school. Young people who said they did not receive enough support said it was because staff did not understand their needs and that there is a general lack of disability, and wheelchair user, awareness. Conversely, young people who said they did receive enough support reported this was due to the wider staff being supportive, understanding their needs and having good one to one support.

Standard training

The Youth Board devised a list of training areas they thought would benefit school colleagues in supporting young wheelchair users in schools. School colleagues were then asked if they had received any of this training in the previous 12 months. The table below outlines the responses given by school colleagues. There was also a not applicable response option which was removed for analysis as some courses, such as hoist training, would not be needed by all school colleagues.

Have you received training on the following in the last 12 months?	Yes	No
Equality	67%	33%
Disability awareness	50%	50%
Supporting young wheelchair users	15%	85%

| Have you received training on the following in the last 12 months?	Yes	No
Wheelchair skills training	10%	90%
Safeguarding	99.05%	0.95%*
Fire safety	87%	13%
Evac chair training	73%	26%
Manual handling	65%	35%
Hoist training	32%	68%
Medical emergency procedures for pupils	57%	43%

*This percentage equates to one respondent.

When school colleagues were asked what they thought was the most useful training, aside from the responses that said all are beneficial, safeguarding (as it is applicable to all children), and manual handling were cited.

- 'Moving and handling to ensure we are not injuring the child or ourselves when moving them from their different pieces of equipment.' (Mainstream school)

The most significant lowest responses are for training relating to wheelchair skills and supporting young wheelchair users with only 10% and 15% respectively. These results demonstrate that training focussing on supporting young wheelchair users is a significant gap and may also demonstrate that school colleagues may not recognise the importance of this training. It also raises the question of how school colleagues are expected to support young wheelchair users when no standard training is provided. Some comments made by school colleagues about training other than safeguarding and manual handling include:

- 'Emergency medication - we have quite a few children in our class who require emergency meds when they have seizures'. (Special school)
- 'For wheelchair user- none. Equality was prob the most helpful as made me think of all the children supported in school' (Mainstream school)
- 'For me the fire safety and evac training as I was unsure how to safely evacuate a wheelchair user.' (Mainstream school)
- 'Evac chair, manual handling and hoist training - this specifically supports the children in our care.' (Mainstream school)

A general question about support for young wheelchair users was also included. There was also a comparative question for young wheelchair users asking if they felt school colleagues had received enough training to support young wheelchair users.

Have school colleagues received enough training to support young wheelchair users in school?

Young Wheelchair Users
- 41% Yes
- 59% No

School Colleagues
- 51% Yes
- 49% No

■ Yes ■ No
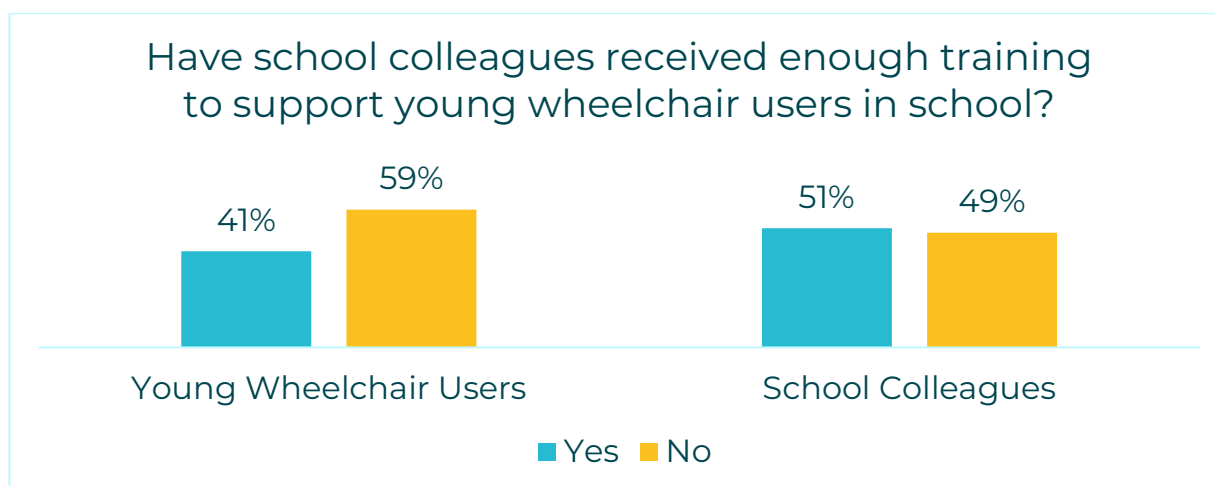
Only 41% of young people said they thought staff at their school have had enough training to support young wheelchair users. While a lower response, this was reflected by school staff with only 51% saying they had received enough training to support young wheelchair users.

These responses demonstrate that there is a postcode lottery for young wheelchair users as to whether their schools have received enough training and therefore receive the support they need. In addition, 24% of school staff said they do not get enough support from their school to support young wheelchair users. The knowledge gap in what support is needed, and how to provide this support, needs to be addressed to ensure school colleagues are informed and feel confident they are meeting the needs of young wheelchair users.

This was also reflected by young wheelchair users where only 31% of young people said staff at their school understood their needs, 53% said they understood some of their needs and unfortunately 16% said staff at their school did not understand their needs. Only when young wheelchair users needs are understood can provisions be put in place.

Only 65% of young wheelchair users said their school makes sure they share information about their needs, or any changes to their needs, with colleagues at their school. Meanwhile 97% of school colleagues said there is an established process for sharing information about individual pupils with disabilities or additional needs across all colleagues and 90% rated this process as excellent or good. Only 8% of school colleagues rated this process neutrally and 2% rated it as poor.

If information is being shared efficiently across schools, but young wheelchair users do not see this in their day-to-day school lives, then these results might be indicative of the knowledge and training gap of school colleagues being confident to translate and implement this information in practice.

Training needs

When young wheelchair users were asked what training they thought would help school colleagues to support young wheelchair users, the main topics young people answered were:

- Understanding young wheelchair users and their needs
- Specific training around disability awareness
- Basic understanding of wheelchair users' and wheelchair maintenance

These responses exacerbate the gap identified above where only 15% of school staff said they had received training on supporting young wheelchair users and only 10% had received wheelchair skills training.

When school colleagues were asked what training would help them to support young wheelchair users in school the following responses were given,

- Respondents from Special Schools highlighted developing young people's independence and completing PEEPs (Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans)
- Mainstream schools with an additional learning needs (ALN) department also highlighted developing young people's independence as well as what to do in an emergency and understanding children's needs e.g. managing expectations, fatigue etc.
- The most frequent responses from mainstream schools (78% of respondents) were wheelchair skills training, including opportunities to have a go at using a wheelchair to understand lived experience, general training about the best ways to support young wheelchair users and understanding specific needs. There were also responses around how to adapt or make the curriculum and specifically PE more inclusive.

Although there are some responses around processes i.e. completing PEEPs and emergency procedures, the responses across all schools are mostly practically based. Themes of understanding lived experiences, how to support individual needs and how to deliver a more inclusive curriculum and PE lessons matches young people's responses of wanting schools to understand their needs and perspectives. Comments from school colleagues included:

- 'I would think that each year our young man moves through the school a bit of training for that year group would be good especially in PE activities.' (Mainstream school)
- 'How to adapt the environment and learning to ensure inclusivity'. (Mainstream school)
- 'Training for staff about the day to day lived experience of wheelchair users and how this might impact on school life and what we as staff can do to make this better'. (Mainstream school)

- 'How to keep the children safe - what are the boundaries in terms of how much/ little to expect in terms of exercise and PE. How to include children in all aspects of the day - for example, when the children are having a movement break - how to adapt this.' (Mainstream with additional ALN department)
- 'Accessibility adaptations to the curriculum'. (Mainstream school)
- 'Our Local Authority used to have a specialist Physical Disability teacher who would provide outreach and support. This used to be highly beneficial for our young wheelchair users. Additionally training on PEEPs (Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan) would be beneficial'. (Special school)
- 'Although Occupational Therapist check the wheelchairs and equipment, we have to do the day to day tightening etc. Some equipment is bulky and difficult to turn over to maintain. Teaching Assistant's often hurt their backs etc. I'm not sure what could be done about this, but maybe a more regular service offered Free of Charge. Training on Transfers to toilet, standing frames etc. would be useful in situ rather than attending generic training.' (Mainstream School)
- 'All staff in school should be trained about the effects of fatigue and how it can feel to be lower down than others.' (Mainstream with additional ALN department)

Inclusion

This section of the surveys looked at physical access in terms of areas of the school and different activities, the use of language, and inclusion practices.

Access

The Youth Board devised a list of areas within schools and opportunities to see the extent, if at all, young wheelchair users were able to access these in the same way as their non-disabled peers. Respondents were asked to select if the area was fully accessible, partially accessible, not accessible at all or not applicable (these responses were redacted for analysis). This question was in both the young wheelchair users and school colleague survey. The table below outlines the response given for fully accessible and not at all accessible.

	Fully accessible		Not at all accessible	
	Schools	Young people	Schools	Young people
Playground	75%	50%	1%	11%
PE lessons	46%	20%	1%	18%
Sports/ playground equipment	30%	13%	4%	32%
School trips	83%	44%	2%	16%

	Fully accessible		Not at all accessible	
Residential school trips	68%	36%	6%	31%
Prom or similar events	90%	47%	0%	13%
Events that engage/invite the local community to school e.g. a fete	86%	44%	1%	12%
Sports day	58%	30%	4%	25%
Class events e.g. class visits, outdoor lessons etc	80%	41%	1%	10%
Drama/school plays	87%	57%	1%	10%
School assemblies	95%	70%	0%	5%
School library	92%	69%	3%	10%
School lunch hall	89%	70%	1%	10%
Extra-curricular or after school clubs	70%	33%	2%	31%
External events e.g. DofE (The Duke of Edinburgh's Award), NCS (National Citizen Service)	41%	17%	16%	42%

The table indicates a disconnect between what areas young people and schools think are accessible. The biggest percentage differences between what schools and young wheelchair users think are fully accessible are prom or similar events (43% difference), events that engage/invite the local community to school e.g. a fete (42% difference) and school trips (39% difference). While the biggest percentage differences between what schools and young wheelchair users think are not accessible at all is extra-curricular or after school clubs (29% difference), sports/playground equipment (28% difference) and external events e.g. DofE (The Duke of Edinburgh's Award), NCS (National Citizen Service) (26% difference).

When discussing these particular results with our Youth Board it was highlighted that this may not be a simple disconnect in what young wheelchair users and schools think but may be indicative of how the term 'accessibility' is interpreted.

When school colleagues were asked for examples of what types of additional support they provide to young wheelchair users to access these activities, the responses highlighted the importance of having 1:1 support and the importance of physical access such as ramps, lifts, toilets and suitable transport. Examples of adaptations to increase accessibility were also provided such as re-rooming to ensure pupils can access the same areas of school to their peers, mini libraries in every classroom and accessible sports equipment.

- 'All areas have step free access. There is lift access to all buildings within the school. All classrooms have adjustable height tables for the wheelchair user. We have accessible toilets on all floors. The PE lessons are adapted to include the wheelchair user.' (Mainstream school)

When young wheelchair users were asked for examples of what type of additional support they would like their school to provide to access these types of activities, the availability of additional staff (especially in relation to accessing extra-curricular activities after school) was also highlighted as was more equipment/facilities but also for schools to plan events/activities with wheelchair users and accessibility in mind.

- 'I feel that only the children who are more abled are planned for and the physically abled children are an afterthought. We need more equipment they can access and activities that allow all children to participate in (Young wheelchair user survey)

What these responses indicate is the importance of accessibility beyond the physical and the difference between accessibility and inclusion. Accessibility centres around removing the barriers which disabled people face. This might involve installing a ramp for wheelchair user's access or offering information in easy read or larger font. Inclusion goes a step further, working to ensure that disabled people are considered valuable members across all areas of society, where disabled people exercise their own agency by having their views listened to and contribute to plans and decisions that affect their futures.

While there were some excellent examples from schools moving beyond accessibility to working inclusively, with special schools recognising developing independence, these were in the minority:

- 'We talk to the child about what she feels comfortable to do. Recently she is standing from her wheelchair onto her walker to kick a football for the first time' (Mainstream school).

There were also examples in the young wheelchair user survey:

- 'The staff have always tried to take the approach that if it's not suitable for my son as a wheelchair user then it's not suitable for any of the children because he is not singled out in his class because of his disability, he is part of the class wholly and they do things together.' (Young wheelchair user survey)

But overall, the responses from the young wheelchair user's survey outlined mixed experiences that moved beyond accessibility to inclusion,

- 'Fantastic in some areas not so great in others. They try but don't fully understand it from the perspective of a wheelchair user.' (Young wheelchair user's survey)

- 'The school include me when possible. My Mum attends events when the school cannot spare staff to help me.' (Young wheelchair user's survey)

Language

Comparative questions were used in both surveys to assess the use of language in schools. For the young wheelchair user's survey we asked if colleagues at their school spoke to them in a respectful way and for school colleagues we asked if they knew the preferred terminology when talking to, or with colleagues, about young wheelchair users.

The graph below outlines the responses given in the young wheelchair user's survey to if school colleagues speak to them in a respectful way.

Do you feel school staff talk to you in a respectful way?

67% Yes
29% Some
4% No
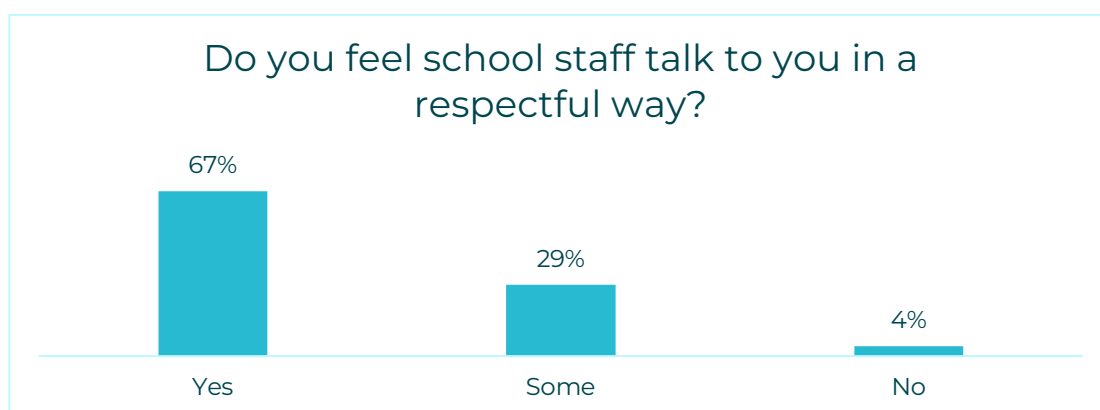
Only 67% of young wheelchair users said staff speak to them in a respectful way, nearly a third of responses said 'some' staff speak to them in a respectful way and unfortunately 4% said staff do not speak to them in a respectful way. Although it could be inferred that this may not only be in relation to being a wheelchair user, for young people that are not always equally included the language staff use can go a long way to making young people feel supported and listened to.

- 'Don't talk to me like a baby even if I have speech difficulties and autism or if someone's non-verbal'. (Young wheelchair user's survey)

The graph below outlines the response given by school colleagues when asked if they knew the preferred terminology when talking to young wheelchair users.

Do you know the preferred terminology when talking to young wheelchair users?
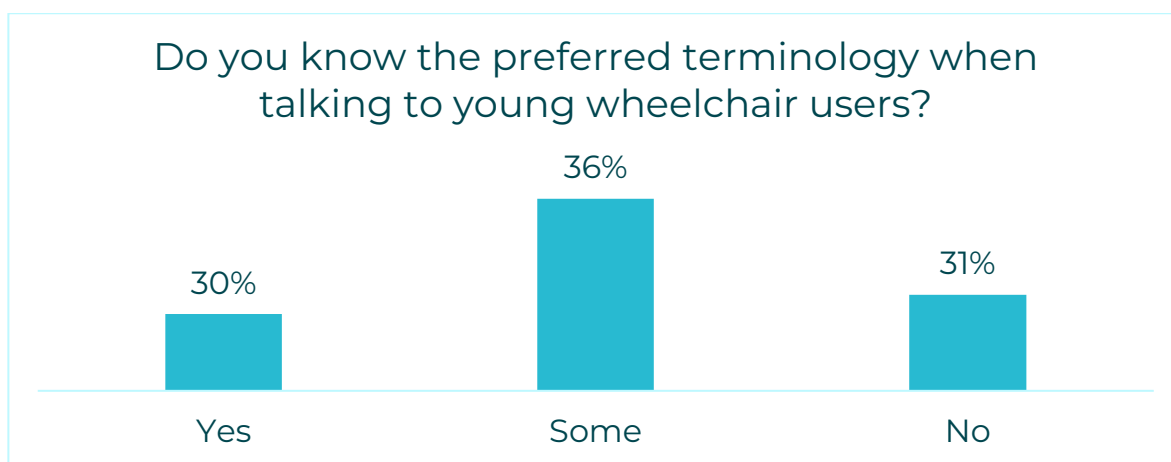
While 30% answered yes, the graph shows that nearly a third of school colleagues do not know the preferred terminology when talking to young wheelchair users. These results were replicated when school colleagues were asked if they knew the preferred language terminology when talking about young wheelchair users to colleagues where 33% answered no, 36% said they knew 'some' and only 30% answered yes.

This appears to be one area where school colleagues are performing better and being more inclusive that they believe, indicating more of a lack of confidence around terminology and engaging with young wheelchair users.

- 'All our outside areas are wheelchair accessible but not all staff have the confidence to use the equipment with our wheelchair users.' (Special school)

More work needs to be done to improve the confidence of school colleagues which will lead to young wheelchair users being spoken to more respectfully and form the basis of improving inclusive practice.

- 'I feel that some people at my school treat the child differently to others e.g., the way they talk to them, like they are much younger but it's their physical ability that's different not their age. It's frustrating because I work very hard with the child to push their boundaries and others don't.' (School colleague survey, mainstream school)
- 'School should not shy away from being inclusive adaptable, proactive, open to learn and engage more positively with family. Schools need to seek out information to stay up to date and should be receiving more funding to help support children's emotional and mental health.' (Young wheelchair user's survey)

Inclusion practices

We know that there is work being undertaken in schools to raise awareness of and promote equality and inclusion. To look at these practices, a comparative question was included in the surveys. Young wheelchair users were asked 'How does your school make sure you, and everyone, feels included?' and school colleagues were asked 'How does your school address any social or attitudinal barriers related to young wheelchair users?'

The table below outlines the themes of the responses given by school colleagues.

Theme	Number of Responses
PSHE/wellbeing curriculum/school assemblies	25
Working directly to the young wheelchair user/family about any concerns	14
Staff training	7
Nothing/don't know	5
Student voice/listening to children/young people	3
Through a specific staff member (Head of Year, EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) specialist)	2
Following school policies e.g. bullying policy	2
We have not/do not have any attitudinal barriers	2
We have a fully inclusive environment	2
Correction and modelling	1

The table shows that utilising the PSHE/wellbeing curriculum/school assemblies was the most frequent response given by school colleagues as how they address any social or attitudinal barriers relating to young wheelchair users. While this approach is a tried and tested way to raise awareness and promote a whole school understanding on various topics, they are usually one-off events, as is talking directly with the young person and their family when an issue may arise. What is encouraging in these responses is the move, along with these traditional approaches, to include processes such as staff training and policies and some schools including utilising student voice mechanisms.

- 'By training of staff, pupil assemblies, teaching pupils about inappropriate terminology and language and its origins and then challenging its use when heard.'
- 'We do assemblies for all students, we meet with children individually, we complete sessions in our tutor lessons, as well as PSCHE. Children and families are sympathetically challenged when these attitudes arise.'
- 'Through assemblies, PSHE, through our Personal Development Offer, DEI Lead, School Council.'

What is concerning are the responses from school colleagues who do not know what their schools do, and those schools that believe they have a fully inclusive environment and have no attitudinal barriers. Failing to acknowledge that attitudinal barriers exist, through reflecting wider society as a minimum, means there are likely no processes or activities in place to highlight, address and improve inclusive practices.

- 'We are a No Outsiders School so there are no barriers evident.'
- 'Our school is very inclusive, so we do not experience any attitudinal barriers'.

Young wheelchair users were asked 'How does your school make sure you, and everyone, feels included?'. The table below outlines the themes of the responses given in the young wheelchair user's survey.

Theme	Number of responses
I don't always feel included	18
There is good communication	12
They make sure I can take part, adapting things if necessary	9
They celebrate diversity	8
They encourage and respect me	6
The school tries their best	5
They plan ahead	4
I feel really included at school; they do a good job	4
They have the equipment I need	1
Not sure	1

The table shows that the most frequent response was that young wheelchair users do not always feel included. These responses outlined physical, social and attitudinal barriers:

- 'It doesn't - I am in a wheelchair, and I have to wait for classes of pupils to come through doors, lift is always broken.'
- 'They didn't. She was excluded from everything. When on crutches she had her crutches taken away from her in classes, was expected to carry trays and was just generally made to feel less than.'
- 'Perceived as different.'
- 'They don't. It is a constant negotiation to nudge them towards being more thoughtful. Whole year reward trips have so far never been inclusive for a wheelchair user.'

However, it is encouraging to see the second largest response is good communication. This is a central feature in ensuring everyone is informed and therefore more able

to engage.

- 'Talking and asking what I would like to take part in.'
- 'The inclusion is very good, students have a voice, and parents can access SMT by phone email or meeting, concerns are listened to and if appropriate acted upon.'

There were also examples of adaptations and inclusion, the third biggest response,

- 'They alter lessons e.g. PE and make sure I can physically get in the classrooms etc'

There were some responses that young wheelchair users had interpreted as positive that could actually be viewed as poor or even negative practice.

- 'Try to adapt where possible or ask for wheelchair users to do a special job-usually taking photos of the event.'
- 'Talking to me and everyone being kind.'
- 'I get a seat at the front of lesson, and they try to put us in groups to make new friends.'

Peers and teachers being kind and talking to a young wheelchair user is not an inclusive practice, but a bare minimum experience that all children, disabled or non-disabled, should have. Some actions, like being asked to do 'special jobs' or being put into new groups, can feel condescending and stigmatising to young wheelchair users and therefore should not be considered positive or inclusive.
There were some responses from young wheelchair users to this question that highlighted how schools can and do create an inclusive environment:

- 'Everyone is equal. Adaptations have been made to enable access the same as everyone else.'
- 'The school tries to make sure everything is always accessible and then will approach us to double check if there is anything else that may be required.'
- 'I am able to take part in every lesson and activities.'

Work experience

Work experience is important for young wheelchair users to prepare for further learning, employment and independent living. While statistics demonstrate that disabled young people do not academically achieve in line with their non-disabled counterparts, statistics also show that this is reflected beyond school through the disability employment gap and the disability pay gap. Therefore, although we had a small response to this section of the report, from both young wheelchair users and schools, the information provided is still important to include.

Accessibility

20% of young wheelchair users told us their school offers work placements and a third (33%) said they were unsure. This section focuses on the responses provided to those that answered yes to this question.

Young wheelchair users tell us that they feel certain career paths are not available to them and that this perception is replicated in some schools. So, we asked young wheelchair users if the work experience placements offered at their school were accessible. Only 32% of young people said work experience placements offered at their school were accessible with 26% saying 'some' were accessible. Another 32% were unsure and 11% said no, work experience placements were not accessible for young wheelchair users.

19 young people said their school offered work experience placements and nine young people were thinking of undertaking a work placement. When asked why they were not undertaking a placement the following responses were provided:

- 'This was last year - the school told us not to bother - that he could either attend the unit or stay at home instead. I was left to find work experience and also support him at the work experience.'
- 'They have been unable to find a suitable placement.'
- 'Unfortunately, due to health and anxiety. My son didn't complete work experience.'
- 'I put out an SOS on Facebook and managed to get one placement of 3 hours weeding.'

75% of schools said they offer work placements. However, it is worth noting that based on the comments made by school colleagues to these questions, this response included both provision for young wheelchair users to attend external work placements as well as receiving work placements at their school.

Of those schools that said they offer work placements only 55% said they were accessible to young wheelchair users with 36% answering some were accessible and 9% saying they were not accessible for young wheelchair users. This, combined with the responses from young wheelchair users, shows there are gaps in communication, understanding, and in coordinating work placements for young wheelchair users.

Processes

Of the schools that said they offer work experience placements, 35% said there was an established process for supporting young wheelchair users to access work experience placements including liaising with employers beforehand. 7% said 'sometimes' there was a process, 25% were unsure and nearly a third (32%) said there was no process.

This was mirrored in young people's responses. When young wheelchair users were asked what steps their school took to make sure work experience placements were accessible there was a mixed response ranging from visiting the work placement ahead

of time, the school completing a risk assessment, to some saying no steps were taken or they were unsure.

Only 20 comments were made by school staff outlining what steps their school takes to prepare young wheelchair users for work experience placements. It is worth noting that schools responded both in terms of organising external work placements and receiving pupils on work placements at their school. The main responses were arranging pre-visit assessments, providing TA/ adult support as needed, the careers curriculum (such as careers days and 1:1 career planning) and discussions with the young person/their family.

Although work experience is a key activity for young wheelchair users to gain employment and promote independent living beyond school, there is a lack of consistency in how it is being delivered. Given the additional barriers young wheelchair users face to gaining employment, there is a need for schools to have clear processes and communication with young wheelchair users. Perceptions, aspirations, and encouraging placements to make reasonable adjustments should also be part of this process as opposed to the young wheelchair users being overlooked or dismissed for certain placements.

Closing remarks: Young wheelchair users

Despite some positive experiences outlined throughout the survey, in this section there were only four comments that were positive i.e. that the young person felt included at school, all from young people that attend mainstream schools. All other comments outlined how their school was not meeting their needs or outlined areas that could improve. Responses included physical barriers, attitudinal barriers, not understanding needs and in some cases active exclusion.

Comments made in relation to physical barriers include,

- 'They should build brand new schools suitable for wheelchair users of all needs- I could not go to a brand new school built locally - as although the whole school looked good and accessible with even a lift, I was informed due to health and safety as I cannot self-transfer into the fire evac chair by myself in the case of an emergency I was not allowed to go!'
- 'I have to wait for an adult to open doors for me as my school is not accessible. The disabled toilet is not big enough for my chair and some classrooms are too small for my chair, so I have to leave it outside in the rain.'
- 'Not all places are accessible and not all activities are inclusive.'
- 'No staff to help so I have to suffer pain because I can't push myself.'

Comments made in relation to attitudinal barriers include,

- 'Getting through to people that she's still a person. She's still a 7-year-old girl who wants to play with her friends. And making sure that 'a couple of steps aren't a problem' mindset isn't a thing.'

- 'They can be bullied. My son has been called some awful names and even had boys grabbing the joystick on his chair. We had to push for the behaviour policy to include disability bullying.'
- 'Help with doors is a big thing. And how to position in class with tables. extra help is needed at lunch to carry trays/food and to ensure that in lessons such as science and DT help is given to obtain equipment needed - but also not doing everything to make me feel useless. Give me a task that they know I can do, don't shy away from things being a little challenging though within reason.'

Comments made in relation to not understanding needs include,

- 'Told we couldn't have the wheelchair in the building it would have to be kept outside when not in use. Told daughter shouldn't get used to having it despite OT prescribing it for use throughout the day.'
- 'Other pupils need to be more aware of disabilities and how they affect people. My son is able to walk, but only for short periods as he has M.E. he is bullied and called a faker for using a wheelchair. This has led to physical bullying in the past.'
- 'Some have much greater awareness of people's needs than others. More SENCO staff and definitely more training to raise awareness of how to adapt to meet their needs.'

Comments made in relation to active exclusion include,

- 'The lift to the art block was broken for months so while waiting for the part my son's friend had to have his art lesson on the ground floor with work sent down from the art dept to do alone with a TA.'
- 'We had issues finding a mainstream school willing to take our child. Other schools were open in their discrimination through saying things like not being able to rearrange the classroom even though the furniture had wheels and saying there were no disabled toilet facilities as they were using the space as a storeroom.'
- 'We've done 6 secondary school visits in the local area and NONE have been confident that they would be able to cope/manage her needs. When I mentioned the autism, they were all very much offering all sorts of interventions. When I mentioned the wheelchair, they all seemed to recoil.'

Closing remarks: School colleagues

For school colleagues, the other comments provided outlined the steps and actions being taken to be inclusive of young wheelchair users, which is reflected in other questions in the school colleague survey as well as the young wheelchair user's survey. The main areas that school colleagues raised as a concern were the suitability of school buildings, a lack of provision for young wheelchair users and the time and funding available to support young wheelchair users.

Comments relating to the suitability of buildings include,

- 'Victorian buildings can make some adaptations difficult, but we found ways to adapt to the best of our abilities.'
- 'Main issue is that most schools are not built to be accessible. We don't have accessible doors or lifts that students can use independently. This means students with physical disabilities are not able to independently travel around schools.'
- 'Many schools are now unfit for purpose to support wheelchair users. Our corridors are narrow and this can be a barrier to offering placement. This is not for lack of trying.'

Comments relating to a lack of provision for young wheelchair users include,

- 'I work in a 6th form & FE college. Very few provision is made for wheelchairs users. Students have to go outside to access ramps to enable them to enter the dining hall & then several sets of steps lead in/out of canteen. Lifts frequently break. Very few accessible toilets. Wheelchair users are not catered for at all well in our college!'
- 'There is not enough mental health support for young people with physical disabilities and the thresholds are too high for disability social care.'
- 'I am deeply ashamed that we do not support wheelchair users in our school, either students or staff. I have raised concerns many times and been dismissed each time. I feel we are letting people down by failing to consider their most basic needs.'

The following comments were made in relation to the time/funding available to support young wheelchair users.

- 'Lack of support for curriculum, huge amount of time to write a bespoke curriculum plus all the medical, fire, manual handling, physio, OT training. Additional funding goes nowhere near covering the staffing costs and nothing for the teacher's workload.'
- Funding, especially in relation to providing one to one support was referenced in both the school colleague survey and the young wheelchair user's survey. The lack of funding to provide support that is needed leads to negative outcomes for young wheelchair users and leaves schools offering inclusive practices based on funds.
- 'Having sufficient funds to make amendments to the environment for full access.' (Young Person's wheelchair user's survey)
- 'There is no one to support with wheelchair use for after school to access anything after school.' (Young wheelchair user's survey)

Summary and recommendations

The aim of these surveys was to capture the lived experience of young wheelchair users and school colleagues. The findings have included training needs of school colleagues and thematic areas to improve training provision, the reality of the accessibility of schools, the difference between accessibility and inclusion, work experience placements for young

wheelchair users and the key areas of importance for school colleagues and young wheelchair users through their closing remarks.

In summary, what both surveys show is the different school experiences young wheelchair users are having, ranging from the inclusive to being actively excluded. More consistency in approaches is needed to both level the playing field and improve the school experience and outcomes for young wheelchair users.

Training, guidance and opportunities to share best practice can act as a catalyst for moving away from schools being just physically accessible to schools being proactively inclusive, creating an equitable education experience for all. In line with making things better and easier, the recommendations have been devised to be as easy as A, B, C: Accessibility, Best Practice and Change.

Accessibility

Recommendation 1: Young people should be included in mandatory school accessibility audits to ensure they accurately reflect how accessible the school site is for young wheelchair users.

Recommendation 2: Schools should be supported to maximise accessibility and all new build schools should be fully accessible. School colleagues should be confident to make adaptions rather than refuse to accept young people, with Local Education Authorities supporting this.

Recommendation 3: The Department for Education should commit to providing adequate funding and support to schools so they can make necessary adaptations, purchase equipment and provide one to one support where needed to ensure no young wheelchair user is excluded.

Best Practice

Recommendation 4: All school colleagues should be provided with training on how to best support young wheelchair users within their setting. This will ensure schools move beyond accessibility towards equity and inclusion. Best practice examples and case studies should be provided demonstrating a whole school approach implementing appropriate language, approach and awareness of individual needs and preferences of the young wheelchair user.

Recommendation 5: Schools should be supported on how to maximise their PSHE and wellbeing curriculum from stand-alone events into practice. Best practice examples and case studies should be provided demonstrating how to work with individual needs and a whole school approach.

Recommendation 6: School colleagues should be provided with training and development opportunities to understand ways to adapt the curriculum, including PE, to meet the needs of young wheelchair users. Best practice guidance and examples should be provided.

Recommendation 7: School colleagues responsible for health and safety paperwork such as Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans (PEEPs) and risk assessments must be provided with training and support to do so and the additional time to enable this to happen. Change

Recommendation 8: Young wheelchair users should all be offered wheelchair skills training within their setting and support on how to advocate for themselves to enable them to receive the best education possible.

Recommendation 9: Schools should develop an established process for the sharing and updating of information pertaining to young people's needs with all school colleagues. This process should be reviewed annually to ensure it is working and fit for purpose.

Recommendation 10: The implementation of a standard process that includes how to support young wheelchair users, liaise with employers and raise aspirations needs to be provided to schools to implement effective and appropriate work placement opportunities.

Recommendation 11: Practices (whether direct or indirect) that actively exclude young people should not be allowed. Schools should review their current practices to identify any which are inadvertently exclusive and implement changes where needed.

What is next for Whizz Kidz and the Youth Board?

Having undertaken this research, reviewed the lived experiences of schools from young wheelchair users and school colleague's perspectives and made recommendations, we will raise awareness of this report and the feedback we have collected.

We are calling on all those within Education to support us in taking action on the recommendations and we will keep working to improve inclusion in schools for all young wheelchair users.

- 'Mainstream schools are fine for wheelchair users, it doesn't have to be a special school. The more that non wheelchair students see and be alongside wheelchair users the better for the future.'

- '2 of the 3 high schools in our area are not accessible. My daughter is going to be attending a high school which is not in our catchment and her friends won't be there. Can't believe in 2024 this is an issue.'

WHIZZ KIDZ

We're here for young wheelchair users

You can find the **Making the Grade** report on our website:

wkidz.org/policy

If you want to get in touch with Youth Board or Whizz Kidz about this report or any other way you feel we can support young wheelchair users, please contact us.

Kidz Board

kidzboard@whizz-kidz.org.uk

Whizz Kidz Policy Team

policy@whizz-kidz.org.uk