

Inclusive PSHE Teaching in Secondary School: Guidance for teachers



Executive summary

This document offers teachers of Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) education guidance for creating an inclusive learning environment for pupils with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream secondary education settings. In particular, the guidance is tailored to the needs and experiences of neurodivergent pupils. Some neurodivergent pupils have expressed that PSHE teaching can increase feelings of anxiety, limiting the degree to which they feel able to participate and engage. However, the recommendations are broadly relevant for all pupils who might find some PSHE topics challenging.

In March – May 2024, researchers from the Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey, and Sussex (ARC KSS), based at the University of Sussex, worked with partners from Brighton and Hove City Council's Families, Children, and Learning team, Brighton and Hove Inclusion Support Service, and 12 neurodivergent pupils from two local secondary schools. Over a series of workshops, the project partners co-designed the guidance for inclusive PSHE teaching in secondary schools.

We used elements of Experienced-Based Co-Design (EBCD) with the pupils so their experiences and emotions around PSHE were central to the project. Discussions with pupils in the workshops were analysed by the researchers. Their statements about their experiences were grouped into themes under four over-arching categories: *the context of PSHE teaching, the learning environment, the content and activities, and the situatedness of pupils and their learning*. The theme summaries were refined and finalised with the pupils and are summarised in this report.

From the theme summaries, we extracted practical recommendations, which we encourage teachers to use to improve pupils' learning experiences in PSHE. We summarise the key principles that arose during the workshops, which we argue form the basis of an inclusive learning environment for PSHE. Within this report, we also present work conducted in parallel by Think Different Consulting and an alternative education provision for neurodivergent children in Brighton and Hove, Oaks Rise. Think Different Consulting and Oaks Rise have redefined the PSHE curriculum for Oaks Rise pupils. This involved working with pupils to identify the requisite skills needed for neurodivergent pupils to access PSHE content, e.g., identifying feelings. The recommendations, key principles, and pre-requisite skills are reported here and are each available in poster format for teachers to display. We encourage teachers to communicate the recommendations that they will implement with pupils by filling out and displaying the PSHE Pledge poster in their classrooms. All documents are available via the QR codes below.

1. Recommendations poster: Making PSHE more inclusive
2. The Foundations of Inclusive PSHE poster
3. Vital Skills for PSHE poster
4. PSHE Pledge poster

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Acknowledgements

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1. What we did and why

Background

Personal, Social, Health, and Economics (PSHE) education refers to a programme of learning to support children and young people develop the experience and knowledge needed to stay healthy and safe, and to equip them with skills they will need throughout their lives. While many elements of PSHE education became a statutory part of the curriculum in 2020 (Department for Education, 2019), there remains wide variation in the implementation of PSHE education.

In a school context, PSHE education plays an important role in children and young peoples' development. There is evidence that it can benefit health and psychosocial development, which has been linked to readiness to learn and academic attainment (Public Health England, 2014). Holistic PSHE education that addresses pupils' socio-emotional development can also have considerable long-term public health benefits (Langford et al., 2014). It is challenging to assess the true impact of the PSHE curriculum in the short- and/or long-term. However, some studies indicate benefits to pupil outcomes:

- Chester et al. (2019) found pupils who reported positive perceptions of PSHE education were more likely to report better self-efficacy, increased spirituality, and less fighting and bullying compared with those with negative experiences.
- The World Health Organisations (WHO's) Health Promoting Schools (HPS) framework addresses the broader school environment. Schools adopting the HPS framework indicate that the approach can improve health behaviours, including a positive impact on fitness, activity, and nutrition across the lifespan, as well as mitigating some of the negative effects of bullying (Langford et al., 2014).
- Thorough coverage of topics including personal safety, health, wellbeing, and relationships and sex have been associated with feelings of belonging at school, reductions in bullying, and better relationships with peers (Chakravorty & Chester, 2016).
- Universal social, emotional, and behavioural programmes implemented at school have been shown to lead to a reduction in antisocial behaviour, and positive effects on social skills, substance misuse, self-image, and mental health (Sklad et al., 2012).

The Department for Education (2019) states PSHE education must be accessible for all pupils. However, autistic people can experience the world differently than non-autistic people (De Jaegher, 2013). This means their experiences are not always represented in PSHE education. Sensory differences, for example, are not typically covered in relation to relevant topics, such as puberty. The experience of sexuality and gender can differ in the autistic population, which has important implications for understanding relationships and sex (Sala et al., 2020). Discussing emotions can also be difficult for autistic young people who have alexithymia, the difficulty to recognise and describe one's own emotions. Little guidance exists for teachers to help ensure neurodivergent pupils' needs and experiences are represented in the delivery and content of PSHE education. Most existing resources are targeted for special education settings and are not appropriate for mainstream secondary settings.

High-quality, personalised teaching is highlighted as important for accessibility of PSHE education for pupils with Special Educational Need and/or Disabilities (SEND) (Department for Education, 2019), yet a whole-school approach is often presented as the best method. In mainstream schools, there are practical challenges in offering highly personalised and tailored education. A significant percentage of pupils in mainstream secondary schools also have some form of neurodivergence or learning difference and 71% of autistic children are educated in

mainstream schools (Department for Education, 2021). Universal methods are therefore necessary for all pupils to have equitable access to the curriculum.

Project conception

This project aimed to develop universal guidance for secondary school teachers and school leaders to help make PSHE education more inclusive of the needs and experiences of neurodivergent pupils. It represents a collaboration between the Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey, and Sussex (ARC KSS), Brighton and Hove Inclusion Support Service (BHISS), and Brighton and Hove City Council's Families, Children and Learning (FCL) team (see below for details). The project arose following reports from secondary pupils, teachers, and support staff that PSHE lessons were increasing feelings of anxiety in autistic pupils, resulting in avoidance of lessons, and in some instances, adoption of problematic coping strategies, such as self-harm after hearing about it in PSHE. As a result, BHISS identified a need to review the impact of PSHE on autistic pupils locally and to improve their experience of, and access to, PSHE lessons. The need to improve the accessibility of PSHE education presented a target for research and practice to work together.

What did we do?

Co-Design Workshops

Co-design is a collaborative process which offers a way for different partners to work together to improve services. Experience-Based Co-Design (EBCD) centres the end-users' experiences and emotions regarding the service they receive. The aim is to make services better for those who use them, so users' perceptions and experiences are crucial in the process. We followed the ethos of EBCD so autistic pupils' experiences and feelings around PSHE education were central in identifying potential avenues for improvement.

In two secondary schools in Brighton and Hove, we delivered two workshops, two-three weeks apart. Six autistic pupils took part from each school and discussed how they felt about PSHE lessons, what they liked/didn't like, and how their experience could be improved. We then reviewed each schools' curriculum map to discuss pupils' experiences and perceptions of the lesson content in greater detail. We used a mixture of whole group discussions and work in pairs, using different activities such as reviewing case studies, worksheets, and post it note reflections.

The facilitators were the researchers and PSHE lead from the FCL team. They took detailed notes of the sessions. The researchers identified common themes and patterns using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and produced a thematic map to form the basis of the guidance for teachers. In addition, the researchers drew out practical recommendations pupils mentioned during the workshops aligned to each theme. The themes and recommendations were reviewed and refined with pupils in a feedback session, and an additional set of key principles were identified as the most important aspects of creating an inclusive environment for PSHE education.

Additional collaborations

During the project, the team initiated conversations with other professionals in Brighton and Hove who were also working to improve PSHE education for autistic pupils. Within this report, we include work by Think Different Consulting and an alternative education provision for neurodivergent children in Brighton and Hove, Oaks Rise. In parallel to this project, Think Different and Oaks Rise were working to redefine the curriculum for Oaks Rise pupils. This included setting out the requisite skills neurodivergent pupils needed to access the PSHE content (e.g., identifying feelings), which they mapped against their curriculum outline. The identification of such pre-

requisites complements the current project by prompting teachers to consider the potential learning needs of autistic pupils that ‘sit outside’ the curriculum but may be necessary to access the content delivered in PSHE. It may therefore be necessary to embed such skill development within PSHE lessons. Here, in addition to reporting the co-designed guidance for inclusive PSHE, we summarise the pre-requisites identified by Think Different and Oaks Rise to offer a complementary package of guidance for teachers.

Who was involved?

The Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey, and Sussex (ARC KSS)

[The ARC KSS](#) supports applied health and social care research in the region. ARC researchers work with partners in education, health, and social care to deliver research that responds to the needs of communities and supports the improvement of local health and care systems. In particular, the Starting Well theme of the ARC KSS supports research that enables early detection and intervention of mental health challenges in children and young people, which includes research regarding the mental health and wellbeing of neurodivergent young people.

Brighton and Hove Inclusion Support Service (BHISS)

[BHISS](#) works with schools and families to support children and young people with SEND. The service includes educational psychologists, specialist teachers, family support workers and practitioners in learning and communication and social, emotional and mental health. BHISS works closely with the professionals, families, and pupils to remove barriers to education within maintained mainstream settings. It consists of a number of teams, including autism and language, sensory support, SEMH and literacy.

Brighton and Hove Families, Children, and Learning (FCL) Directorate

[The FCL Directorate](#) brings together different services for children and young people from birth up to the age of 25, with services for both adults with learning disabilities and skills and employment. This includes schools, early childhood education, SEND, fostering and adoption, careers, youth support and adult education. The FCL team take a whole family approach to support safe and stable lives.

Think Different Consulting

[Think Different Consulting](#) offers advice, support, and guidance to autistic young people, their families, and schools. Their bespoke advice and guidance focuses on ensuring that the content and delivery of the curriculum is appropriate for autistic pupils. Using a strengths-based approach, Think Different set-up neuro-affirmative structures in schools, support autistic young people to recognise their strengths and self-advocate, and deliver organisational training.

This report

We summarise pupils’ discussions around each of the key themes and highlight the practical recommendations that align with each theme (section 2.). We then display the key principles for inclusive PSHE identified in the co-design workshops (section 3.). and the pre-requisite skills for PSHE devised by Think Different and Oaks Rise (section 4.). The full list of practical recommendations are recapped in section 5.

2. Guidance for Inclusive PSHE

The aim of the project was to co-design a series of recommendations for making PSHE teaching inclusive of the needs of neurodivergent pupils. Following the workshop discussions, the researchers coded pupils' statements and grouped the codes into themes under four overarching categories: *the teaching context*, *the learning environment*, *the content and activities*, and *the situatedness of pupils and their learning* (see figure 2.). In this section, we summarise the discussions with pupils relating to each theme and extract the actionable points to be summarised in the recommendations list. The theme summaries and recommendations list were reviewed with pupils in a final feedback session to check the documents accurately represented pupils' views and experiences. Their feedback and suggestions were then incorporated into the final documents.

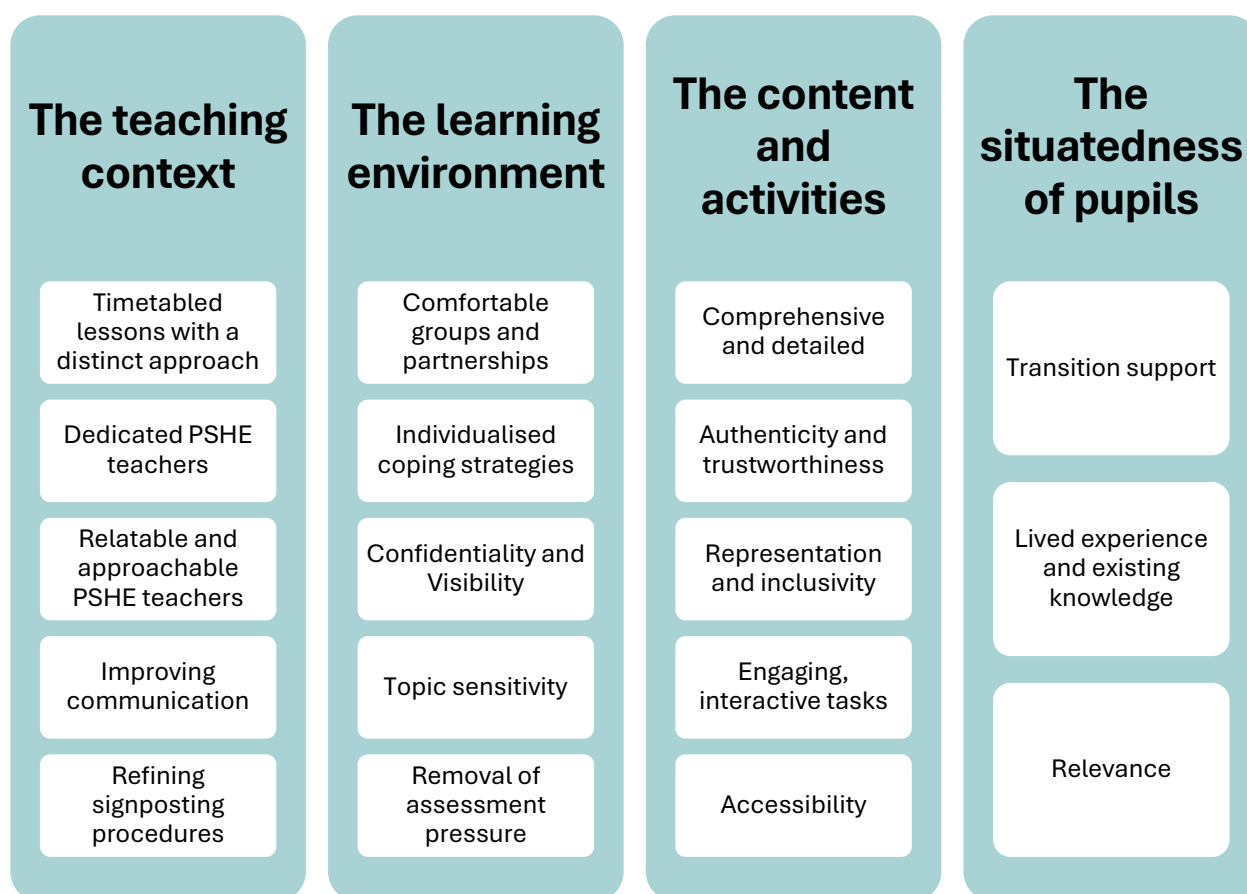


Figure 1. Summary of guidance for inclusive PSHE

2.1 The context of PSHE teaching

Several discussions with pupils centred on how PSHE fits into the broader educational context. They identified three elements that link to the strategic planning and delivery of PSHE at a school-wide level: *the need for timetabled lessons with a distinct approach, dedicated PSHE teachers, and the value of relatable and approachable PSHE teachers.*

They also identified two practical ways of better integrating PSHE teaching into their broader school experience: *refining signposting processes and improving communication about planned PSHE content.*

Timetabled lessons with a distinct approach

- Deliver **regular, timetabled PSHE lessons** from year 7.
- Foster a **nurturing and informal** environment for PSHE lessons.
- Make **expectations and boundaries explicit** in a more informal subject setting.

Some pupils only received PSHE lessons in form time, which is typically half an hour. In some schools, pupils have timetabled PSHE lessons, but only after year 7. Pupils expressed the need for regular, timetabled lessons from year 7, and strongly asserted that PSHE in form time is *“not good enough, doesn’t go into enough depth, and doesn’t give time to complete the tasks”*. They mentioned that some content is just covered during assembly (e.g., bullying), which they didn’t think was effective as pupils are not well engaged and it doesn’t allow for interaction, which they highlighted as crucial for PSHE learning throughout the discussions.

“You’re never going to know what someone’s going through...if they’re just being silly and then you give them [detentions]... I feel like it is kind of upsetting because you don’t actually know if they have an experience with that topic. If, like, let’s just say you’re talking about bad stuff in relationships you don’t know necessarily who’s been a victim...”

Pupils stated that PSHE teaching should be more informal than other lessons and they should feel more nurturing than other parts of the curriculum. They recognised the need for clear boundaries to set the tone for more serious lessons and indicated that they need reminding of relevant ground rules for lessons where it is appropriate, not just at the beginning of term. They strongly expressed that discipline and punishments should be educational, and that discipline during PSHE can disrupt relationships and make it feel like an unsafe/uncomfortable space.

Dedicated PSHE teachers

- Employ **teachers whose specialty is PSHE** or who are passionate about teaching PSHE and who can be a source of support outside of lessons.

Pupils expressed greater trust in teachers when PSHE is their specialty or when they are noticeably passionate about teaching PSHE. They highlighted that teachers often teach several subjects, which makes pupils doubt their commitment and knowledge. They said it was

important to them that teachers can speak to the complexity and nuance of PSHE topics and who are “*trained and knowledgeable*”. Some pupils stressed that, at present, they weren’t confident that they would have their questions answered accurately or thoroughly.

Pupils described how some topics require a sensitive approach, particularly when they are closely linked to potential lived experiences of pupils in the classroom. Pupils thought teachers could be trained to support pupils to feel comfortable talking about sensitive topics, create novel tasks that keep pupils engaged, and to challenge misconceptions (e.g., about neurodivergence), so their experiences are not invalidated.

They also suggested dedicated PSHE teachers could be an acceptable, comfortable source of additional support outside of their lessons. Pupils described feeling more comfortable expressing themselves to teachers who they would not see teaching their next lesson.

Re: question boxes: “I feel like with a lot of questions that people ask it’s just the teacher not being able to cover it properly but not be able to not educate enough on the subject to be able to cover all those questions because then the students have to ask and feel uncomfortable...”

Relatable and approachable PSHE teachers

- **Build relationships and trust with pupils.**

Building a relationship with their PSHE teacher was highlighted as an important way for pupils to feel comfortable during PSHE lessons. While communication and relationship preferences may present differently in neurodivergent students, the pupils emphasised the value of building trust and rapport with PSHE teachers, who were noted as a potential source of support at school. Pupils emphasised they would only feel comfortable opening up to a teacher with whom they had developed a trusting relationship with. It was important to pupils that there was a safe teacher within the school who they could go to, and be honest with, if they needed to. Pupils strongly expressed that teachers who are typically responsible for discipline delivering PSHE is problematic as it can disrupt trust.

Teachers sharing small pieces of information about themselves can help them convey authenticity and can help build rapport with pupils. They said it is important to “*build a bond with them so they [teachers] know how you feel*”. For some, building rapport and discussing sensitive topics was easier with a teacher of the same gender, however, this needs careful management (see 2.2 *inclusivity and representation*). For others, teachers’ knowledge and demeanour were more important than gender. When talking about external partners delivering PSHE, they stressed that building a relationship with them was important if they are expected to contribute and to share their views.

Improving communication

- **Send pupils a summary of the content ahead of time, including additional resources and links to further support.**

Neurodivergent students may respond well to knowing the structure of the lesson and topic ahead of them which may foster predictability and reduce anxiety. Some pupils indicated that they would find it helpful if the content of PSHE lessons were communicated to them ahead of time, e.g., sending content summaries by email at the start of the week. This would allow them to review the content in a comfortable environment and have time to process the information. It will also allow them to prepare themselves for more challenging lessons, such as by planning to use coping strategies (see 2.2 *coping strategies*), communicating any discomfort to teachers, or by speaking with trusted adults, such as parents/carers, peers, and/or siblings.

Refining signposting procedures

- **Place flyers/posters with links to further support** around the school and ensure these are offered in different formats.
- **Co-produce flyers/posters with pupils** so that pathways for further support and additional content reflects what they will feel comfortable accessing.

Pupils expressed needing clear, specific avenues where they can access further information and support. They said they would like additional information that is topic specific *and* information about general sources of additional support, such as for sexual health or mental health challenges. Pupils stressed the current support avenues aren't trusted (such as school safeguarding teams), the processes of contacting them is not clear, and they are uncertain about what will happen after they contact them. They expressed interest in visiting trusted, youth-centred content online, but they recognise they need to be directed to appropriate resources to

"...like having them (websites) written on the board when you go into lessons seeing it. So... during the lesson when you have your iPad out when you're on the PowerPoint, you can just put it up, search it up and find out the information"

avoid reliance on social media. Some expressed wanting posters and flyers with up-to date information they will feel comfortable using. They said flyers need to be available in different locations so pupils can pick them up without being seen or they can be given to all pupils during a lesson. However, others didn't think the content would be accessed. Pupils discussed the practicalities of using the sites within lessons, which they thought could add to the taught content.

2.2 The learning environment

During the workshops, pupils strongly expressed the importance of a safe and comfortable learning environment for PSHE. They recognised the potential complexity and sensitivity of the topics, which they argued could be challenging for some pupils, particularly when connected with their own lived experiences.

Pupils identified several elements that underpin a comfortable learning environment, including *comfortable seating and group work arrangements, use of individualised coping strategies, not being singled out, sensitive delivery, and removal of assessment pressure.*

Comfortable groups and partnerships

- Consider group-based learning approaches, where pupils are placed in **small, comfortable groups for the duration of the school term/year**.
- Ensure all pupils have peers in their group with whom they feel **comfortable**.
- Reflect on pupils' personal communication preferences: some neurodivergent pupils find the social demands of group work difficult to navigate. Having **options for solo working** might help them stay engaged.

Pupils consistently mentioned that working with, and sitting next to, peers with whom they felt comfortable was integral in PSHE lessons. They want to discuss PSHE topics with peers, but with those whom they feel safe. They argued that seating plans are inappropriate for PSHE lessons and can force pupils who want to learn to sit with disruptive pupils who don't take the lesson seriously. They argued this is a more prominent issue in PSHE compared with other lessons due to the lack of assessment and sensitivity of topics. Pupils gave examples of working with pupils who had bullied them in the past when covering "private things".

Pupils said that working within small groups of their choosing would help, and where these groups remain consistent for the whole year. They stressed that no one should be in a group without some peers they are comfortable with. Devising a consistent seating plan around these groups would help pupils who find it challenging to sit in different places for each lesson.

"I thought with having specific people or groups that you work with in some of the lessons. I thought that would be good because then I thought you'd be like a bit more open, yeah, to talk to about some of this stuff. So probably learn a bit better as well."

Equally, some neurodivergent pupils can find it difficult to navigate the social demands of group work. Pupils noted that having different options for engagement can support them to stay on task when they are struggling to interact with others. Reflecting on the communication preferences of neurodivergent pupils and responding accordingly, such as by offering solo work, can help reduce feelings of anxiety and support continued engagement with the lesson.

Individualised coping strategies

- Allow pupils to use **individualised coping strategies** in lessons.
- Accept **time-out passes** in PSHE without question.

Pupils emphasised that they should be allowed to use personalised coping strategies in PSHE, which may be in addition to the strategies that are allowed in other lessons. They listed examples including doodling/colouring, listening to music (when the teacher isn't talking), bringing in objects that help them feel comfortable (e.g., fidget toys, sensory toys or plushies), and using time-out passes that are specific to the lesson. To enable this to be universally accepted within the classroom context, some pupils suggested sensory boxes that could be available during PSHE lessons.

Time-out passes were recognised as a valuable tool, but they said these should be accepted without question in PSHE. Some pupils wanted the capacity to share how they were feeling in the moment with the teacher. They discussed tools like the Just Right tower, which year 7’s would find it helpful if everyone in the class used it so the teacher could gauge how the class felt. However, those in older groups didn’t feel this would be necessary.

Confidentiality and visibility

- **Avoid activities where pupils will be singled out** or pressured to give their views on controversial or uncomfortable topics.
- Avoid competitive tasks, such as debate tasks, instead consider learning activities based on **collaboration and cooperation**.
- Use **anonymous question or feedback methods** where pupils cannot be linked to their statements, e.g., using online tools.

Pupils mutually shared feelings of discomfort during PSHE when they are required to voice their opinions on controversial topics. They described activities like moving to different sides of the room if you agree/disagree with a statement. Some find moving around the room overstimulating, and all agreed that such activities can make them feel singled out. They reflected that pupils may not give honest views due to pressure to stand with friends. Heads down, thumbs up was suggested as an alternative. Overall, pupils described worrying what others will think when they share their opinions or their lived experiences, which might differ from the views of others or could lead to bullying. They suggested that certain activities should be on a voluntary basis.

On balance, pupils recognised the value of debate and discussion where different opinions are represented. However, they described finding debate-style tasks challenging when they are poorly managed. They stressed that *“it should be properly mediated, because I think the teacher has the responsibility to control the situation”*. In particular, they want teachers to intervene when statements are not factual and to ensure everyone can have a voice and be heard if they wish to.

Anonymous question or feedback boxes were discussed frequently, and opinions of pupils were overall favourable. It was important to pupils that all questions were answered, even if they seemed trivial. There were strong reservations about being linked to their question through their handwriting or being seen adding statements to a physical box. Online options might be considered in place of physical feedback boxes, such as [Slido](#), [Mentimeter](#), or [Poll Everywhere](#).

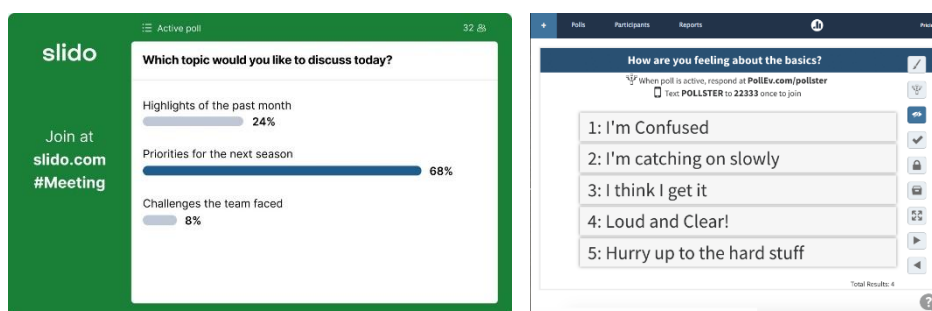


Figure 2. Examples of Slido and Poll Everywhere for anonymous questions and feedback

Topic sensitivity

- Use **trigger warnings** and ensure graphic content is graded across year groups.
- **Allow for authentic reactions** to uncomfortable topics, including laughter. Recognise and discuss the responses and then refocus.
- Ensure the **tone of the lessons** is suitable for the content (i.e., not too light-hearted for serious topics, and with appropriate levels of consideration for more serious topics).
- Consider **grading how serious a lesson is**, such as 'useful', or 'very serious'.

Many pupils expressed feeling uncomfortable talking about certain PSHE topics. Pupils specifically mentioned drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, injections, sex education, cuckooing, and how to use menstruation products. They expressed that graphic images could trigger feelings of discomfort, make them feel sick, and were sometimes scary. They discussed the importance of graded exposure throughout secondary school and the value of liberal trigger warnings, both in the lesson and in advance content summaries. They also suggested that for particularly challenging statutory topics, including Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), there could be time at the end of the lesson for a debrief to discuss any arising distress and discomfort.

“If there’s maybe a difficult lesson then maybe just save 5 or 7, or 6 minutes at the end to kind of just wind down from it, so you’re ready for the next lesson.”

Pupils expressed finding some PSHE topics amusing or said they might laugh out of discomfort, which can be reprimanded. They thought teachers should allow for laughter and authentic responses, which can sometimes be involuntary due to anxiety, or may be a result of 'reading the room' differently than their peers. Teachers could address the potential reasons for such responses before emphasising the serious nature of the topic.

Pupils described experiencing PSHE lessons that either all delivered with the same degree of seriousness or are covered in a light-hearted manner that doesn't seem appropriate to the content. They reflected that this doesn't reflect pupils' real-world reactions and responses, and that they can find it difficult to gauge how serious the lesson is. Some pupils stressed that they could gauge how serious the lesson is when the tone is varied appropriately. However, some neurodivergent pupils find reading tone difficult. Teachers may want to explicitly state how serious a lesson is, such as by grading content as 'useful', 'serious', or 'very important'.

Removal of assessment pressure

- **Avoid homework and assessment tasks** where possible. Anonymous surveys and feedback forms are acceptable if they cannot be linked to the responses.

Pupils strongly expressed that homework was unhelpful for PSHE. The described wanting to engage with the topics without pressure of assessments. Pre- and post- teaching questionnaires were also deemed too akin to assessments and pupils described feeling like they were being

covertly tested. National questionnaires such as the Safe and Well at School Survey were described as acceptable, due to the evident anonymity and perception that they were valuably contributing to national databases. Some pupils said that plenary tasks were acceptable to help teachers figure out how to pitch the lessons and tailor the content to groups with different levels of experience, but it was important that it does not feel like an assessment. Anonymous question boxes and feedback boxes or websites were recognised as a potential way around this when implemented carefully (see 2.2 *confidentiality and visibility*).

2.3 The content and activities

Pupils conveyed an eagerness to learn about the depth and nuance of PSHE topics (*comprehensive and detailed content*) and demonstrated a degree of scepticism with regards to the sources of information (*authenticity and trustworthiness*). It is important to them that content is authentic and factual, and that they feel represented in the teaching content and examples (*representation and inclusivity*). They stressed that pupils disengage during PSHE as the content and tasks do not always feel engaging or relevant to them (*engaging, interactive tasks*) or at times, the tasks are not accessible (*accessibility*).

Comprehensive and detailed content

- Go **beyond the headlines** and provide comprehensive, detailed information (e.g., regarding the effects of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, how unhealthy relationships develop, and the day-to-day realities of mental health challenges).

Pupils argued that PSHE lessons are often over-simplified and expressed wanting to learn about topics in greater depth. They are eager to learn why people make certain choices, how things will affect them and what their experiences might be like. They want to learn "*beyond the headlines*" and to clearly understand the causal links to some consequences of behaviour that feel far removed. They want to discuss the complexity of issues in a way that respects their existing understanding and reflects their experiences. During the discussions, pupils identified several specific examples of topics that they feel have high relevance to them and their peers and which they indicated wanting to cover in greater depth:

- How drugs, alcohol, or tobacco impact your body and mind.
- What the experience of giving birth is like.
- The emotional impact and experience of puberty.
- Thorough sex education covering biology, health, and pleasure.
- Safer sex practices that consider diversity across gender identities and sexual orientation.
- Alcohol units and lower alcohol options to help them make safer choices.
- What is considered a normal response in terms of drug taking to help them keep their friends safe.
- Different types of bullying, the impact, and how to feasibly prevent/combat bullying.
- The realities of mental health challenges.
- Early warning signs for mental ill-health.
- Greater depth in diversity and prejudice topics, including coverage of neurodivergence.
- Ongoing, detailed learning around finance and economics.

Authenticity and trustworthiness

- *Make sure case studies use **realistic examples**, avoiding extreme cases that feel far removed from pupils' lives.*
- ***Map case studies onto the experiences of pupils** by representing early warning signs and depicting how problematic behaviours can gradually develop.*
- ***Cite sources of information** so pupils know it is **trustworthy**, and to support them to distinguish between trustworthy sources and sources that might spread misinformation.*

Pupils described finding case studies interesting and engaging, and they were repeatedly mentioned as a preferred task. However, they are sceptical about the authenticity of extreme examples, which they stated are not always portrayed sensitively and do not appear to relate to their own experiences. They expressed wanting case studies with realistic narratives that represent everyday scenarios and demonstrate the early indicators of risk. The trustworthiness and accuracy of examples was described as an important factor in their engagement with and understanding of the topic. For some topics, such as drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, pupils described a preference for factual information.

Representation and inclusivity

- ***Avoid stereotyping content** or tasks that can perpetuate negative stereotypes (e.g., 'draw someone who uses drugs').*
- *Ensure all pupils can learn about the **anatomy and experiences of other genders** (for all topics, but specifically puberty, relationships, sex, and mental health).*
- *Ensure **LGBTQ+ relationships** are covered, including safer practice for sexual activity that is not just vaginal sex.*
- *Consider the demographics of pupils so they are **represented in the stories, images, and content**.*

Pupils described being separated into male and female groups to cover certain topics like puberty and some aspects of sex education. While some pupils felt more comfortable with this approach, they also stressed that it excludes pupils with different gender identities, who are expected to choose which group they wish to join. They strongly asserted that all pupils should learn about the anatomy and experiences of other genders, which they thought would aid a better understanding of others' experiences and would be crucial when caring for children and/or in relationships. They identified the potential implicit messages being sent to young people when delivering contraceptive advice to groups split by gender, which they reflected suggests contraception is an individual rather than a shared responsibility.

Pupils stressed that it was important that they feel represented in the stories, content, and images. Specific examples included considering the demographics of pupils in the classroom

and ensuring they are represented in images, recognising that some images may depict people without public hair and acknowledging/discussing why this might be, and covering LGBTQ+ relationships, including safer practice for sexual activity that is not just vaginal sex.

Engaging, interactive tasks

- Use **novel and engaging tasks/games** on balance with PowerPoint slides and videos.
- Use **technology** for feedback and polls.
- For more complex topics, allow **discussion in small, comfortable groups** or activities that allow a deeper exploration of the issues.
- **Avoid repeating content** across year groups.

Pupils recognised teachers' efforts to diversify the activities in PSHE lessons. However, they argued that there are too many PowerPoints, worksheets, and videos. They described the interactive tasks as 'boring', because they only allow for surface level engagement with the topics, or 'embarrassing', because they are required to debate their peers and share their views on sensitive topics. Some pupils gave examples of PowerPoint slides with out-of-date content, or that teachers were unfamiliar with, which impacted their motivation. They mentioned that PowerPoints can be useful when teachers' delivery is engaging and passionate, and when the slides are used as a starting point for discussion.

Greater novelty in tasks and content was discussed as a way to aid learning and memory. Pupils strongly expressed that repetitive videos results in disengagement and negative perceptions of PSHE as a whole. Opportunities for discussion in small, comfortable groups were mentioned as a favourable activity. They reflected that learning through discussion can offer the opportunity to cover the nuance of the topics, can help them learn, and help them develop and understand their own perspectives.

Pupil 1: "I'm pretty sure that's the purpose of a PowerPoint. It's like you put the basic, it's like you put the talking points on there, and then you explain it in depth". **Pupil 2:** "Yeah like just reading from the slides... how'd you expect us to want to know it if you if you've not put the effort in to look before the lesson... you've not even attempted it before you've entered the classroom."

Accessibility

- Ensure **accessibility** of content and activities, with tasks explained explicitly and avoiding ambiguity.
- Offer **different avenues for engagement** if pupils struggle with a set activity.

Pupils stressed the importance for lessons to be checked with regards to accessibility (e.g., checking videos can be heard, terminology is not ambiguous, tasks are explicitly explained, and take-away tasks are appropriate for the lesson format). Pupils emphasised that it can be stressful if there is not enough time to complete the tasks in the lessons.

Pupils described struggling to complete some tasks, meaning they disengage from the lesson overall. Offering alternative avenues for pupils to engage with the content can ensure that tasks are accessible for all pupils. This might mean offering options for solo work rather than discussion-based tasks, such as writing their own notes/illustrations or acting as scribe for the group (see 2.2. *comfortable groups and partnerships*). It may also be as simple as offering additional paper if they don't want to draw in their books.

2.4 The situatedness of pupils and their learning

During the discussions, pupils expressed wanting recognition for their lived experiences and existing knowledge. They emphasised that it was important to them that PSHE teachers viewed pupils holistically, recognising their differing experiences and identities outside of the educational context. They stated that content which reflects where they are in their educational journey and the impact of the broader geopolitical landscape would help them understand the relevance of the topics to their lives. Their statements were grouped into the following themes: *transitions support, lived experience and existing knowledge, relevance, and reviewing learning*.

Transitions support

- ***Incorporate transition support into PSHE teaching in the first term of year 7, including walking tours of the school, and revisit in year 10/11 to support pupils' progression to further education/training and as preparation for leaving school.***

Some pupils described missing PSHE content in year 7 due to difficulties with the transition to secondary school. They discussed the potential for transition support to be delivered during PSHE, including walking tours of the school with the whole class. They strongly expressed a need for thorough support for transitions so they don't miss important content at the start of the year. Pupils were also keen for their secondary school journey to be recognised and reflected in PSHE lesson content. Specifically, they stated covering transitions into college/further education in year 10 and/or 11 would be a valuable addition.

Lived experience and existing knowledge

- ***Recognise and respect the potential lived experience of pupils in terms of their disabilities, neurodivergences, co-occurring conditions, and their experiences of the topics covered (either first-hand or as a witness).***
- ***Challenge misconceptions of neurodivergence and negative stereotypes surrounding other conditions or [protected characteristics](#).***
- Consult pupils via an anonymous survey at the start of the term/year to **measure their current level of knowledge/experience** (this could be done online).

Pupils stressed a lack of recognition for their lived experiences and existing knowledge of PSHE topics. Some pupils described content as patronising when it is not pitched at the right level: "We are educated and we're not stupid". Pupils stated that greater depth on certain topics could help

ensure pupils with different experiences and levels of understanding get the content they need. One pupil described vaping as an example, stating that pupils understand the negative consequences, but not why people choose to vape or how to stop. Pupils agreed that attention to the complexities of the topic, as well as the headline effects, would ensure appropriate education for all pupils.

“I feel like they do explain what it does. I don't, like, I don't really see any like point in dragging on the smoking and vaping [is bad]... because we see on cigarette boxes, we see the damages it causes... everyone knows about it. So, I don't really feel like that's the interesting part of it, maybe why people do it, why they think it's ok”.

There was recognition that teachers cannot assume all pupils have foundational knowledge of core topics but emphasised that greater tailoring would aid engagement and be more beneficial in terms of learning outcomes. Plenary tasks, particularly using technology, were noted as an acceptable way for teachers to gauge the knowledge of the class.

“...everyone's looking at you to like know what to talk about because like when I've been in a classroom and then we're talking about autism and then people everyone's looking at me like as if I know the answer to the question and it's like, the teacher should be the one to answer that, I shouldn't be the one who feel responsible to answer any of the questions.”

It was important to pupils that neurodivergence and gender identity are covered in the context of discrimination and prejudice. Pupils mutually agreed that it is essential for teachers to have a good understanding so they can effectively and sensitively address negative comments or misconceptions from their peers. Pupils recognised that this approach is also essential for topics that may impact other pupils, including mental health issues and drug or alcohol abuse, which pupils may have experienced or witnessed.

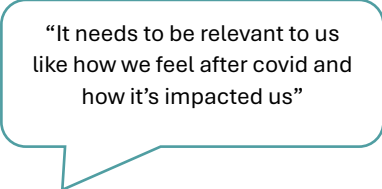
Relevance

- Where possible, **consider pupils' broader experiences in society** and how this might affect their learning or their level of understanding (e.g., regarding the impact of Covid, climate change, and the geo-political landscape).
- Consider pupils' **internet and social media use** as an important factor in their perceptions of social issues and exposure to content.
- Ensure content is delivered at **relevant time-points** (e.g., discussing career options later in secondary, rather than in year 7).
- **Put their learning in context**, in terms of relevance for them now/in the future, and with regards to how what they have learned fits into the broader topic.
- **Revisit practical topics** at different stages of secondary so pupils can update and extend their learning, such as finance and careers.

All pupils described wanting the content of PSHE to reflect their current experiences. They gave the example of career choices, which feels irrelevant to them when covered in year 7. Instead, they argued that being supported to understand what they are good at and passionate about would be more relevant in year 7, which could be mapped onto career options in year 10 when they are starting to think about their future. They also stated that some topics such as drugs,

alcohol, and tobacco or pornography are not sufficiently covered in year 7. They described being exposed to messages around drug and alcohol use and seeing pornographic images on the internet or social media. They therefore emphasised the importance of receiving accurate information on such topics in PSHE lessons to counter the messages they receive from peers and social media.

Pupils also described wanting the content of PSHE to reflect their experiences in society. They referenced their experiences during Covid-19 and the impact of climate change, social media, and politics as all relevant to discussions around mental health, finance, and career options.



“It needs to be relevant to us like how we feel after covid and how it’s impacted us”

There were some topics that pupils argued would be useful to come back to throughout their schooling, so they could update their learning, including finances and careers. They stressed recapping what they had learned so far was helpful for them, but that it was challenging to cover uncomfortable topics several times. Pupils indicated that it would be helpful for their learning to be put into context with regards to the topic overall. For example, by summarising what has been covered so far and what they will be covered in the rest of the term. They argued this would be more helpful at the start of the lesson rather than covering in detail what they will learn in that lesson as they described finding this repetitive.

3. Foundations of Inclusive PSHE

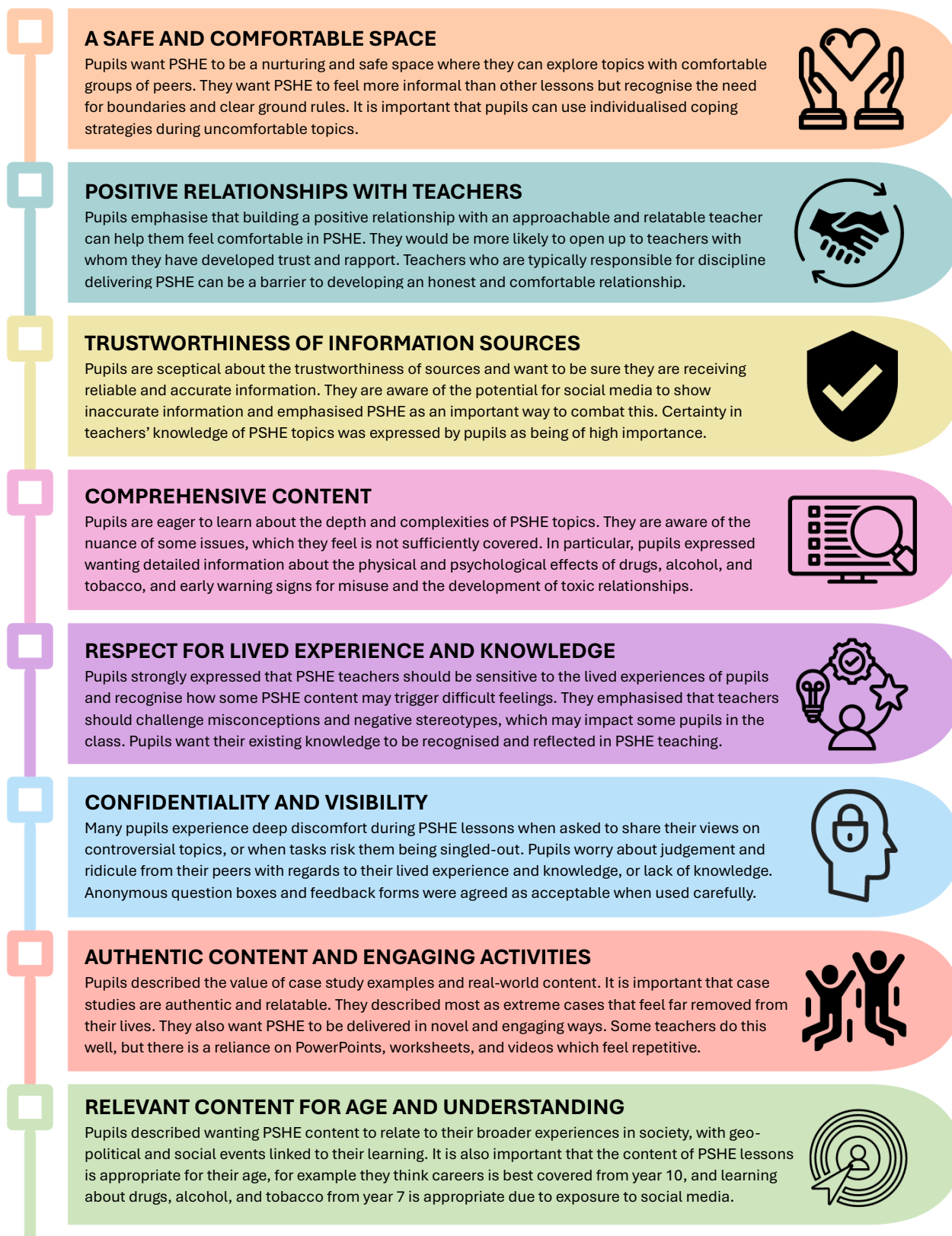


Figure 3. The Foundations of Inclusive PSHE

4. Vital skills for PSHE

Understanding emotions

Recognising feelings

Tuning into
interoceptive cues

Interpreting
interoceptive
information

Understanding emotion
labels/descriptions &
how these can differ

Understanding how
feelings might be
displayed in different ways

Knowing different types of
empathy (cognitive/
affective/hyper-empathy)

Understanding disability and neurodivergence

Understanding the social
model of disability & the
disabled community

Understanding social
norms (e.g., politeness)

Understanding what
disability means

Understanding
differences between
neuro-types

Reading social cues in
different neuro-types (e.g.,
tone, sarcasm)

Understanding
perspective taking as two-
sided (double empathy)

Understanding social differences

Understanding literality/
honesty and how this can
lead to vulnerability

Recognising polarised
thinking in self and others

Understanding masking/
camouflaging/ people
pleasing & rejection
sensitivity dysphoria

Making, managing, and
learning from mistakes in
relationships/ socially

Understanding and
recognising impulsivity in
self and others

Behavioural echolalia -
copying others' actions
without understanding them
or their consequences

Figure 4. The pre-requisite skills for PSHE, developed by Think Different and Oaks Rise

5. Summary of Recommendations

From the workshop discussions, we identified practical recommendations for teachers and employers to improve the PSHE experience for neurodivergent pupils. These are summarised here and relate to the preceding sections: a) *the teaching context*, b) *the learning environment*, c) *content and activities*, and d) *the situatedness of pupils and their learning*. The recommendations are also available in a poster format, which can be printed and displayed in classrooms.

a) The Teaching Context:

1. Communication and relationship preferences may present differently in neurodivergent young people. However, pupils appreciate staff who take the time and effort to **build a connection and trust** with pupils.
2. Foster a **nurturing and informal** environment for PSHE lessons.
3. Make **expectations and boundaries explicit** in a more informal subject setting.
4. While the approach may be more informal than other subjects, neurodivergent students may also respond well to knowing the structure of the lesson and topic ahead of them which may foster predictability and reduce anxiety. This could involve sending pupils a **summary of the content** ahead of time, including additional resources and links to further support.
5. Place **resources with links to further support** around the school and ensure these are offered in different formats, such as flyers they can take away/posters/links sent via email.
6. **Co-produce flyers/posters** with pupils so that pathways for further support and additional content reflects what they will feel comfortable accessing.
7. Where possible, employ **teachers whose specialty is PSHE** who can be a source of support outside of lessons. Where this is not possible, provide additional training to teachers so they can confidently talk about PSHE topics in depth.
8. Deliver **regular, timetabled PSHE lessons** from year 7.

b) The Learning Environment:

1. Consider group-based learning approaches, where pupils are placed in **small groups for the duration of the school term/year**.
2. Reflect on pupils' person communication preferences: some neurodivergent pupils find the social demands of group work difficult to navigate, so having **options for solo working** might help them stay engaged.
3. Ensure all pupils have peers in their group with whom they feel **comfortable/safe**.
4. Allow pupils to use **individualised coping strategies** in lessons.
5. Accept **time-out passes** in PSHE without question.
6. **Avoid activities where pupils will be singled out** or pressured to give their views, particularly on controversial or uncomfortable topics.
7. Avoid competitive tasks, such as debate tasks, instead consider learning activities based on **collaboration and cooperation**.
8. Use **anonymous question or feedback methods** where pupils cannot be linked to their statements, e.g., using online tools.
9. Use **trigger warnings** liberally and ensure graphic content is graded across year groups.

10. **Allow for authentic reactions** to uncomfortable topics, including laughter, which can be an involuntary response rooted in anxiety, or a response to 'reading the room' differently. Recognise and discuss the responses and then refocus.
11. Ensure the **tone of the lessons** is suitable for the content (i.e., not too light-hearted for serious topics, and with appropriate levels of consideration for more serious topics).
12. Consider **grading how serious a lesson is**, such as 'useful', 'serious', or 'very important'.
13. **Avoid homework and assessment tasks** where possible, anonymous surveys and feedback forms are acceptable if they cannot be linked to the responses or through use of technology tools.

c) Content and Activities:

1. Ensure **accessibility** of content and activities (e.g., audio quality), with **tasks explained explicitly** and **avoiding ambiguity**. Neurodivergent pupils can find it difficult when there is not enough time to complete tasks during lessons, try to **set tasks that can be completed in the time frame**.
2. Offer **different avenues for engagement** if pupils struggle with a set activity.
3. Make sure case studies use **realistic examples**, avoiding extreme cases that feel far removed from pupils' lives.
4. **Map case studies onto the experiences of pupils** by representing early warning signs and depicting how problematic behaviours can gradually develop over time.
5. **Avoid stereotyping content** or tasks that can perpetuate negative stereotypes (e.g., 'draw someone who uses drugs').
6. **Cite sources of information** so pupils know it is **trustworthy**, and to support them to distinguish between trustworthy sources and sources that might spread misinformation.
7. Go **beyond the headlines** and provide comprehensive, detailed information (e.g., regarding the effects of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, how unhealthy relationships develop, and the day-to-day realities of mental health challenges).
8. Ensure all pupils can learn about the **anatomy and experiences of other genders** (for all topics, but specifically puberty, relationships, sex, and mental health).
9. Ensure **LGBTQ+ relationships** are covered, including safer practice for sexual activity that is not just vaginal sex.
10. Consider the demographics of pupils so they are **represented in the stories**, images, and content.
11. Use **novel and engaging tasks** on balance with PowerPoint slides and videos. Workshop new ideas with pupils to gauge acceptability.
12. For more complex topics, allow **discussion in small, comfortable groups** or activities that allow a deeper exploration of the issues.
13. **Avoid repeating content** across year groups, particularly the same videos.

d) Situatedness of pupils

1. **Incorporate transition support** into PSHE teaching in the first term of year 7, including walking tours of the school, and revisit the topic **in year 10 and 11** to support pupils' progression to further education/training and as preparation for leaving school.
2. **Recognise and respect** the potential **lived experience** of pupils in terms of their disabilities, neurodivergences, co-occurring conditions, and their experiences of the topics covered (either first-hand or as a witness).

3. **Challenge misconceptions** of neurodivergence and negative stereotypes surrounding other conditions or [protected characteristics](#).
4. Consult pupils via an anonymous survey at the start of the term to **measure their current level of knowledge/experience** (this could be done online).
5. Ensure content is delivered at **relevant time-points** (e.g., discussing career options later in secondary, rather than in year 7, and covering vaping, drugs and alcohol, and pornographic images earlier in secondary school).
6. Where possible, **consider pupils' broader experiences in society** and how this might affect their learning or their level of understanding (e.g., regarding the impact of Covid, climate change, and the geo-political landscape).
7. Consider pupils' **internet and social media use** as an important factor in their perceptions of social issues.
8. **Put their learning in context**, in terms of relevance for them now/in the future, and with regards to how what they have learned fits into the broader topic (i.e., what have they covered so far, and what will they cover in future lessons).
9. **Revisit practical topics** at different stages of secondary so pupils can update and extend their learning, such as finance and careers.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this project was to co-design recommendations for making PSHE education more inclusive of the needs of neurodivergent pupils. The workshops with secondary pupils revealed valuable insights into neurodivergent pupils' experiences of PSHE, which supported the development of concrete, practical recommendations for teachers and school leaders to improve their learning experience. While developed with autistic secondary pupils, the recommendations are broadly relevant for pupils with a range of Special Education Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream secondary education. We also anticipate that the implementation of the recommendations would create a more comfortable and safe learning environment for all pupils. The recommendations detailed here overall represent modest changes to the delivery of PSHE but have the potential to make a significant impact to pupils' experiences of PSHE lessons.

The pupils involved in the project demonstrated excellent understanding of the complexities of PSHE topics. They recognised the difficulty in designing appropriate and engaging lessons for pupils with different experiences and knowledge. Central to their discussions was the importance of a safe and nurturing environment, where they can build positive relationships with teachers and discuss sensitive topics in depth with comfortable peers. Pupils consistently referred to activities in PSHE that made them feel uncomfortable or singled-out, and that were repetitive, leading to disengagement in lessons. Activities that are sensitive to the topic and emotional experiences of pupils, who may feel judged or embarrassed about sharing their views, are integral to a safe teaching space. Pupils stressed that they were interested in learning in a variety of ways and would be most engaged when teachers are passionate and knowledgeable about the topic. All pupils expressed a strong interest in PSHE, and there was a shared desire for the content to go into greater depth and to be based on authentic examples and sources of trustworthy information. They stressed that PSHE content that represented their lived experiences, educational journey, and their broader experiences in society would aid their learning and engagement by highlighting the significance to them as individuals.

All pupils participated in all workshops and feedback sessions. They were meaningfully engaged in the project and actively participated in the workshops, each offering animated and enthusiastic feedback on their experiences. The small group model reflects the wish for pupils to work in small, comfortable groups in PSHE lessons and demonstrates the potential for productive and comprehensive discussion around complex topics.

Pupils were passionate for their insights to be used to improve the learning experience of all pupils. Employing a similar co-production approach to the design of PSHE content could enable greater tailoring to the needs and experiences of pupils in different year groups and could improve novelty and appeal of tasks and activities. In addition, co-producing flyers and guidance for pupils to access further support could help build pathways to support that are acceptable to pupils and feasible within the school context.

This project has resulted in the development of several materials for PSHE teachers and education leaders to support positive changes in the delivery of PSHE education. All materials can be found on the [Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey, and Sussex's website](#). We encourage teachers to [record their pledges to make PSHE teaching more inclusive](#), so we can assess the feasibility and impact of this guidance in the future.

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Inclusive PSHE Teaching in Secondary School

Guidance for teachers
July 2024

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