

Inclusive School Audit

Most leaders can describe their inclusive practice. Far fewer can show, with a date on it, what is strong, what is patchy and what has changed since last September. This guide walks you through running the audit as a leadership conversation, rating the 42 statements honestly across the seven DfE principles of inclusion, and coming away with a picture your governors and your local authority will recognise. About ten minutes to read, about ninety minutes to run.

7 DfE principles · 42 statements · run twice a year · sits underneath your inclusion strategy

For headteachers, SENCos, inclusion leads, senior leaders and governors · Belong Programme resource · version 1.0, July 2026 · review by July 2027

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Most leaders can describe their inclusive practice with confidence. The harder ask is showing it on paper, with a date on it: where practice is strong, where it is patchy, and what has actually changed since last September. That is what an inclusion strategy has to do, and every mainstream school in England publishes one by 31 December 2026. Most schools find an audit shows more strength than they expected, and gives them somewhere specific to put next year's effort.

The Inclusive School Audit is a structured self-assessment against the **seven DfE principles of inclusion**, taken from the Department for Education's *Inclusive mainstream fund: best practice for schools* guidance. Each principle carries six statements about your practice and provision, so **42 statements in total**. Your leadership team rates each one on a four-point scale and adds notes as you go.

What comes back

- **A score out of 4 for each of the seven principles**, plus an overall score, based only on the statements you rated.
- **A reflection question and one next step per principle**, matched to the band you scored in, rather than a generic action list.
- **A summary report** you can take to your leadership team, your governing board and your local authority.
- **An audit file (.json)**, which is the one to keep. You import it at the end of the year so your baseline and your review sit side by side. You never need to open it yourself.

The one-line summary

Seven DfE principles, 42 statements, rated honestly by your leadership team twice a year, giving you a dated record of where your school stands and what has moved.

2 The seven principles at a glance

This section sets out the seven DfE principles and the reflection question your results page asks against each one. Print it and keep it on the table, so everyone can see the seven principles while you talk.

Principle	The reflection question
1 Ambitious leadership and governance that embeds inclusion	Where in your school improvement plan and governor cycle is inclusion named explicitly, and who is accountable for it?
2 Evidence-based support prioritising early intervention	How quickly does support begin once a need emerges, and how do you know it is working?
3 High quality adaptive teaching with curriculum designed for all learners	How consistently do pupils with SEND learn alongside their peers through high-quality, adaptive teaching rather than separate provision?
4 Enriching provision beyond the classroom that all children can access	Do pupils with SEND take part in trips, clubs and enrichment at the same rate as their peers, and how do you know?
5 A safe and respectful culture fostering belonging, attendance and participation in learning	What do your attendance, suspension and belonging measures tell you about the experience of pupils with SEND compared with their peers?
6 Strong partnerships with families and wider services	How well do families of children with additional needs feel informed, involved, and able to shape your practice?
7 Inclusive environments with continuous improvements to accessibility	Which changes to your environment have reduced barriers for pupils, and what does the next one need to be?

Each principle carries six statements, so 42 in total. The full wording is in the tool and in the printable paper version.

We have built this as a leadership-group session led by the SENCo or inclusion lead. We are assuming that 42 statements across seven principles, feeding a report that goes to governors and your local authority, is not a one-person job. If your school works differently, disagree with us here and run it the way that gets you an honest answer.

A realistic group is four people, and each of them brings something the others cannot:

- **Headteacher.** Holds the school improvement plan, the spend and the accountability. Principle 1 is largely their evidence.
- **SENCo or inclusion lead.** Chairs the session, knows the graduated approach, the provision map and the individual picture behind the whole-school one.
- **A phase or curriculum leader.** Knows what adaptive teaching actually looks like in classrooms, which is the difference between a rating of 3 and a rating of 4 on principle 3, high-quality teaching and curriculum.
- **Your SEND governor, if available.** Asks the question nobody inside the school thinks to ask, and can carry the findings straight back to the board.

A smaller school may run this with two people, and that is fine. The one thing that is not negotiable is that **every rating is challenged by more than one voice**. A solo audit records one person's view of the school, which is a different and much less useful document.

The tool says the same thing

The contributor field in the audit prompts you: *The DfE expects inclusion to be a shared leadership responsibility, so it strengthens your audit to complete it with more than one voice*. That prompt reflects the same DfE *Inclusive mainstream fund: best practice for schools* guidance the 42 statements come from, where ambitious leadership and governance is the first of the seven principles.

Twenty minutes of preparation saves an hour of guessing. Do these six things.

- **Block ninety minutes as its own meeting.** This is a session in its own right for the small group named above, not an item tacked onto the end of a staff meeting. Most groups take sixty to ninety minutes, so block the full ninety and nobody is watching the clock.
- **Bring the evidence you already hold.** School improvement plan, governor minutes, provision map, attendance and suspension data broken down by SEND, participation records for clubs and trips, and any belonging or pupil-voice survey. Nothing new is needed: you are putting what you already hold on the table.
- **Decide who types.** One person drives the tool and writes the notes. Everyone else talks. Swapping the laptop around breaks the conversation every time.
- **Decide which audit you are doing.** Start-of-year baseline, or end-of-year review. If it is a review, have last year's audit file to hand, ready to import. You do not open it yourself: the tool reads it.
- **Find your URN.** Your unique reference number is the 6-digit number on your school's page at [Get Information About Schools](#).
- **Read the 42 statements beforehand.** Send them round the day before. People arrive with evidence in mind rather than reaching for it live.

Why the URN matters

The URN does two jobs. It pairs your baseline with your end-of-year review, so the two files read as one school rather than two, and it identifies your school in the wider area picture, so an authority's report counts each school once. A mistyped URN does not break your own audit, so check it once and you never have to think about it again.

Where your results go, and where they do not

- **Your audit stays yours.** Your ratings, your notes and your summary report belong to your school. Nothing is published, nothing is ranked, and nothing is shared with other schools.
- **You share the report deliberately, or not at all.** The summary report is for your leadership team, your governing board and, if you choose, your local authority. Sending it is your decision and your action.
- **Your audit file is the only copy you can reopen and edit.** We receive your school's details, your principle scores and your rating against each statement. We never receive your notes. If your file goes missing we can rebuild it from what we hold, with every rating back in place, but your notes stay with you and cannot be restored. Save the .json somewhere you will find it in June, alongside your inclusion strategy, without opening it.

- **Local authorities see figures, not files.** Where a local authority is building a picture of inclusion across its area, myHappymind can report scores across the schools it works with, including which individual practices schools find hardest, so the authority can see where support is needed. Your notes are never part of it, and no report is published for a group of fewer than ten schools.

5 Running the session

This is the section that decides whether your audit is useful.

The four-point scale

Every statement is rated on the same scale. These are the definitions the tool shows, word for word.

1 • Emerging	Not yet in place, or just starting. Practice is ad hoc and depends on individuals.
2 • Developing	In place in parts of the school, but not yet consistent everywhere.
3 • Embedding	Consistent across the school and becoming routine practice.
4 • Embedded	Fully established, monitored and sustained. Part of everyday practice for everyone.

Your principle average is banded the same way: below 1.5 bands as 1, below 2.5 as 2, below 3.5 as 3, and 3.5 or above as 4.

Rate the school as it is today

Not as it will be once the new intervention beds in, not as it was in the good year before half your team changed. Today. The tool is explicit about this, and it is the single easiest rule to break, because leaders think in plans.

From the tool, before you start

This audit works best as an honest conversation across your leadership team, so it helps to involve your headteacher and SENCo. Rate each statement as your school is today, not where you plan to be. There are no wrong answers: the baseline is the starting point your end-of-year progress is measured from.

How to avoid a run of 3s

Name this pattern at the start of the session, out loud, so everyone can see it happening. A group of colleagues under mild social pressure converges on the comfortable middle. Nobody wants to be the person who says the school is emerging, nobody quite believes it is embedded, and the whole audit slides into a run of 3s that tells you nothing and moves nowhere next year.

The counter is one question, asked every single time somebody offers a 3 or a 4:

Ask it every time

Where is this **not** true? If anyone in the room can name a class, a key stage, a subject or a group of pupils where the statement does not hold, rate it down. A statement that is true in Key Stage 2 and shaky in Key Stage 1 is Developing, not Embedding.

Why "Embedded" needs a line of evidence

A 4 is a claim about monitoring, not about intention, and it is a claim your governors, your local authority or your own June review will come back to. The tool asks you for the evidence the moment you select one:

Evidence prompt on a rating of 4

You have rated practice here as embedded. Add a line of evidence below: an embedded rating means you can point to how you know, not just recognise the practice.

Apply a simple test in the room. **If you cannot name the monitoring that sustains it, it is Embedding, not Embedded.** Who checks, how often, and what happened the last time the check found a gap? If those three answers do not exist, rate it 3 and write down what would need to be true for it to be a 4. That sentence becomes next year's action.

What to write in the notes

The notes field is the most useful part of the file when you open it again in eleven months. The scores tell you where you were. The notes tell you why. The tool suggests: *what this looks like in your school, evidence you drew on, context behind your ratings.*

- **The evidence you leaned on.** "Provision map, spring review" is worth more than a paragraph of description.
- **The exception you found.** "Strong in Years 3 to 6, thin in Reception" is the finding, not a caveat.
- **What would move it up one band.** One sentence. This is where next year's priorities come from.
- **The context you will forget.** Staffing gaps, a building project, a cohort with an unusual profile.

When the room disagrees

Rate the lower of the two, and put the disagreement in the notes. A head who sees 4 and a phase leader who sees 2 have found something more valuable than a number: the practice looks different from the office than it does from the corridor. Record both views and who held them. A disagreement is a finding, and it is usually the finding worth acting on first.

You can leave a statement unrated

If you genuinely have nothing to go on, leave it. Guessing pollutes the average and you will not remember next year that it was a guess. Be clear about the consequence, though: **unrated statements are excluded from averages and appear blank in your exports.** The tool keeps a running count of how many of the 42 you have rated, and spells out the consequence on screen before you finish:

On-screen, if statements are unrated

Unrated statements are left out of your scores, and appear blank in your exports. You can go back and finish the audit at any time.

Leaving two or three blank is a reasonable, honest audit. Leaving fifteen blank is a signal that you should reconvene with better evidence, because a report built on 27 statements will not carry the weight you need it to.

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Whole-school, not individual children

Keep this rule visible for the whole session, because conversations about provision drift naturally towards the children the provision is for.

The data note in the tool

This audit describes your school's practice and provision. It should not name individual children or contain anything that falls under your safeguarding or data protection policies.

In practice: talk about a child in the room if that is how you reach an honest rating, then write the pattern rather than the person. "Two pupils waited a term for an EP appointment" belongs in the notes. Their names, their year group if it identifies them, and anything from a safeguarding record do not. Your summary report goes to governors and, if you choose, to your local authority, so write every note as something you would be comfortable for both to read.

Your results page opens as soon as the last statement is rated. For each of the seven principles you get a score out of 4, a reflection question, and one suggested next step chosen to match the band you scored in. A school at Emerging on principle 4 and a school at Embedded on principle 4 are given different next steps, because they need different things.

Alongside that you can download a **summary report**, which is the document for governors and your local authority, and the **audit file (.json)**, which is the one to keep.

Your four next steps after a baseline

- 1** Store your audit file (.json) somewhere safe and memorable, for example alongside your inclusion strategy. It is the only copy that holds your notes and the only one you can reopen and edit, and you will need it at the end of the year. You do not need to open it, and it will probably not open in anything useful if you try: it is written for the tool to read, not for you. Lose it and we can rebuild your ratings for you, but not your notes.
- 2** Work through the reflection questions and suggested next steps on your results page, and use your lowest-scoring principles to shape this year's priorities, activity and spend, including your Inclusive Mainstream Fund allocation.
- 3** Share the summary report with your leadership team and governors so inclusion is a shared responsibility.
- 4** At the end of the year, come back to this tool, choose end of year review, and import your audit file to see your progress.

Name it honestly when you share it

This is a structured self-assessment against recognised DfE principles, with a date on it. Describe it that way to governors and your local authority, rather than as an inspection or a validated measure, and it will hold up under questioning.

8 The year in two audits

One audit gives you a position. Two give you a direction, and direction is what governors and local authorities actually ask about.

1 Baseline at the start of the year

Rate all 42 statements. Download the audit file and the summary report.

2 Review at the end of the year

Come back, choose end of year, and import your saved audit file. Your school details load automatically, and your baseline rating sits alongside each statement as you work through it again.

3 Read the two side by side

Your results show start and end of year together for every principle, with the change on each, ready to evidence progress to governors and your local authority.

A rhythm that works

- **September.** Baseline, with the leadership group. Ratings feed straight into this year's priorities and your Inclusive Mainstream Fund spend.
- **June or July.** End-of-year review, same group, same ninety minutes. Import the baseline first so you are rating against your own record rather than your memory of it, and read your notes from September as you go: they tell you whether the actions you named actually happened.

Seeing last year's rating beside each statement is deliberately uncomfortable, and useful for the same reason. Where you gave a 3 in September and can only justify a 3 in June, that is worth knowing before you set next year's priorities.

How long does it really take?

About ninety minutes for a first baseline with a group of four, including the arguments, which are the point. The end-of-year review is quicker, usually an hour, because your baseline ratings are already on screen.

Can we change a rating later?

Yes. Nothing is fixed while you are working, so go back and change any rating before you download. Once you have downloaded the audit file, treat it as your dated record for that point in the year, and put any change of view into the next audit rather than reissuing this one.

What if we have no data for a statement?

You have two honest options. Rate it on your professional knowledge and say so in the notes, or leave it unrated and accept that it is excluded from your averages. Worth noticing, though: on statements about tracking and impact, having no data is itself close to an answer, and usually points to the lower end of the scale.

Does the local authority see our notes?

Not unless you send them. Where a local authority is given a picture of its area, that is scores, as explained in section 4, and your notes are not part of it. Your notes travel in your summary report, which is yours to share or not share. Write them as a professional record rather than a private aside, and keep them about practice and never about a named child.

What happens if two of us fill it in separately?

You get two files and two views, and neither one is your school's position. Run it once, together. If people want to prepare, send the statements round beforehand and ask them to bring evidence rather than ratings.

Is this the same as our inclusion strategy?

No, and it helps to keep them distinct. The audit is your evidence base: where you are, on seven principles, on a date. The inclusion strategy is what you publish. They share the same seven principles, so a well-run audit gives you most of the raw material for the strategy and the honest self-assessment underneath it.

Do we have to give a URN?

It is worth it. The URN pairs your baseline with your review, and identifies your school if your local authority is building a picture of its area. Without it your audit still works for you. It is just harder to join up with anything else later.

Do we need to open the audit file?

No, and on most computers it will not open in anything useful. A .json file is written for the tool to read rather than for a person, so double-clicking it may do nothing, or ask you to pick a program. That is normal and it does not mean the file is broken. Save it without opening it, and at the end of the year choose end of year review in the tool and use the import button to load it back in. That is the only thing you ever need to do with it.

What if we lose the audit file?

Keep it somewhere you will find it in June, because it is the only copy that holds your notes and the only one you can reopen and edit. If it has gone, email your Customer Happiness Manager. We hold your school's details and your rating against every statement, so we can send you back a working file with all of that restored, ready to import. What we never hold is your notes, so those boxes will be empty, which is exactly why the file is worth keeping safe. If your school never sent its scores, a fresh baseline is a perfectly honest place to start again: run it, date it, and treat that as your new starting point.

The score is not the point of this audit. The point is ninety minutes in which four people who see your school from four different angles have to agree, out loud, on what is actually true. The number is what you take to governors. The conversation is what changes next year.

The Inclusive School Audit is part of myHappyMind Belong, our dedicated inclusion programme. Questions about running the audit, the paper version, or how it sits alongside your inclusion strategy? Speak to your Customer Happiness Manager.

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