



COGAI

Cognitive Accessibility Institute

An independent COGAI evidence review

Cognitive Accessibility in Education

A review of evidence about England's curriculum and neurodivergence. It looks at barriers that may make it harder for some learners to take part and learn.

Publication

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Scope

Schools and mainstream education in England

Executive summary

Access is not the same as cognitive access

A learner can be present, receive the same curriculum and use the same systems as their peers, yet still face avoidable demands that make understanding, remembering, organising and responding more difficult.

COGAI starting point

Main idea

Being able to attend school or open a learning resource does not always mean a person can understand and use it easily. This is the main idea explored by COGAI. The two source reports did not test this exact statement.

What the evidence says

Recent government reviews recognise that curriculum volume, organisation, transitions, inflexible environments and assessment practices can create barriers, with pupils with SEND and neurodivergent learners disproportionately affected. [1, pp. 28-31; 2, pp. 5-10, 24-27]

What COGAI suggests

COGAI uses six areas to think about the findings: understanding, attention, memory, planning and organising, knowing what to expect, and the effect of sensory conditions. Independent experts have not yet tested this approach.

What this report does

It translates national evidence into a practical model for examining the learner's experience without diagnosing pupils or grading a school as cognitively accessible.

What should happen next

Researchers should test the approach with learners, families and education staff. Schools can then use the results to decide which changes help and which do not.

[About this report](#)

What we reviewed and what we did

COGAI reviewed two recent official reports and compared selected findings with ideas about cognitive accessibility. We did not search and assess every study on this subject. This is not a school inspection, a health assessment or a finding that England's National Curriculum is inaccessible.

Primary evidence base

Curriculum and Assessment Review final report: Building a world-class curriculum for all, published November 2025, and The Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group report, published February 2026.

Evidence from a source

A statement supported by a named source and page or article reference. Some sources review other evidence rather than report a new study.

COGAI view

What COGAI thinks the evidence may mean. It is not presented as a government view or as proof that one thing causes another.

COGAI suggestion

An idea for action based on the review. It must be tested. It is not proof that the action will help.

Example or unanswered question

A made-up example is clearly labelled. An unanswered question is shown as something that needs more research.

How we worked: COGAI chose the two reports because they are recent national reviews about the curriculum, SEND and neurodivergence in mainstream education. We selected relevant sections and compared them with six areas that COGAI proposes for review. We did not carry out a full search of all research, formally score the quality of each study, use independent reviewers, test the approach with people, or collect new data.

Evidence from a source

What the Curriculum and Assessment Review tells us

The Review says the education system has strengths but does not work equally well for every learner. It says the amount, order and organisation of curriculum content matter for fairness as well as standards.

Curriculum structure can reduce barriers [1, pp. 28-29]

The Review says a well-designed curriculum can reduce unfair barriers, give teachers greater clarity and better support different needs.

Evidence from the Curriculum and Assessment Review final report, pages 28-29.

Organisation and amount matter [1, p. 29]

The Review says learners with SEND are affected more when a curriculum is unclear, overloaded or badly organised. It links a manageable amount of content with having time to secure learning, build life skills and take part in wider activities.

Evidence from the Curriculum and Assessment Review final report, page 29.

Moving between school stages [1, pp. 30-31]

The Review says moving from primary to secondary school and gaps in core knowledge and skills can add to differences in attainment.

Time for teachers [1, pp. 50-51]

A curriculum that fits the available teaching time can give teachers more room to adapt learning and support different learners.

COGAI view

COGAI thinks these findings may point to barriers across the education system. Difficulty may come from the amount and order of content, unclear information, limited time, changes between settings and too little time to secure learning. This is COGAI's view of the evidence.

Evidence from a source

What the Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group tells us

The group says mainstream education should respond to each learner's strengths and needs. It gives particular attention to learning environments, the curriculum and assessment.

Flexible curriculum and assessment [2, pp. 24-25]

The report calls for flexibility in what is taught and how it is taught. It supports teaching that responds to learners and asks for more research into different ways to assess learning.

Inclusive environments [2, pp. 25-27]

It says learning environments should address physical, social, sensory and communication barriers, and that rigid policies or teaching styles can constrain access and participation.

Needs before labels [2, pp. 17-21]

The report says support should be based on a broad understanding of strengths and needs. Support should not depend on a medical diagnosis. Learners and families should be involved.

Staff knowledge and support [2, pp. 22-24]

The report says staff need good learning opportunities, reliable evidence and practical tools so support can be more consistent.

Evidence and COGAI view

The report describes differences in how people process sensory information, communicate, use language, pay attention, plan, organise, process information and remember [2, p. 14]. COGAI thinks schools should consider these differences when reviewing tasks and environments. The source report supports meeting needs without waiting for a diagnosis [2, pp. 17-21].

Source key: [1] Curriculum and Assessment Review final report (2025). [2] Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group report (2026). Full references and links appear on page 16.

Suggested COGAI approach

Six areas to consider together

COGAI suggests using the six areas below when reviewing learning. They are based partly on the differences described in the Neurodivergence report [2, p. 14]. The source also mentions processing speed. COGAI has not made it a separate area because speed can affect understanding, attention, memory and planning. The six areas are not meant to copy every difference listed in the source. Independent experts have not yet tested whether they form a reliable method.

Understanding

Can the learner understand the words, purpose, structure and expected result? The source report discusses differences in communication and language [2, pp. 6, 14].

Attention

Can the learner find what matters and return attention after an interruption? The source report describes differences in attention [2, p. 14].

Working memory

How much information must the learner hold in mind while doing something else? One study found links between working memory scores and some attainment results, but did not prove cause and effect [3].

Planning and organising

What must the learner plan, start, check or switch between? The source report describes differences in these skills [2, p. 14].

Knowing what to expect

What uncertainty or change must the learner manage? The sources discuss school transitions and inflexible environments, but do not provide a tested measure for predictability [1, pp. 30-31; 2, pp. 25-27].

Sensory conditions

Could sound, light, movement or other sensory conditions affect taking part? The source report describes sensory differences and environmental barriers [2, pp. 6, 14, 25-27].

Question suggested by COGAI

Do not ask only whether a learner can open or attend something. Also ask what they must understand, remember, plan, ignore or manage to take part. This question is for discussion. It is not a diagnosis or a score.

Evidence and COGAI view

Understanding and organising information

The way information is presented can affect performance. In two experiments, people did better when related information was brought together rather than separated [4]. This result may not apply to every learner, subject or type of material.

Instructions

COGAI question: must the learner work out or remember several steps, priorities or conditions? This report does not set a maximum safe length for instructions.

Language

COGAI question: are important words, the purpose and the expected response clear? The source report recognises differences in communication and language [2, p. 14].

Where information appears

Research supports checking whether related information has been separated and must be put together in the learner's mind [4]. The original experiments do not cover every classroom format.

Using digital systems

COGAI question for future research: do information split across screens, changing labels and separate deadlines add extra work? The two main reports did not test online learning journeys.

COGAI view

Making information clear does not mean making learning less ambitious. It means checking whether finding and understanding the task is harder than the learning itself.

COGAI suggestion to test

Put the purpose first, use the same words for the same things, show separate steps, make priorities clear and show an example of a finished result. Test whether this helps different learners.

[Evidence and COGAI view](#)

Attention, memory and mental effort

One study found links between working memory scores and some curriculum results at ages 7 and 14 [3]. This does not mean working memory causes every learning difficulty.

A COGAI checklist, not a score

Look at the content, instructions, navigation, sensory conditions, time pressure and uncertainty together. This report does not show that these factors simply add up, matter equally or can be turned into one reliable score.

Attention split between sources [4]

Two experiments found benefits when related information was brought together in the tasks studied. Other settings must be tested.

Working memory [3]

Working memory scores were linked with some attainment results. The study did not set one limit for everyone or prove that one type of support works.

Ways to recover

COGAI suggests making it easy to check, go back and start again after confusion or interruption. This report has not tested whether that helps.

COGAI view

The Curriculum Review links a manageable amount of content with time to secure learning. It also discusses the importance of secure earlier knowledge [1, pp. 29, 46-47]. COGAI believes this supports looking at the task as a whole, but the source does not prove the checklist above.

COGAI suggestion to test

Try visible steps, short summaries, ways to return to information and enough time to secure learning. Check whether these changes actually help the intended learners. Do not assume they help everyone.

Evidence and COGAI view

Planning, knowing what to expect and change

The Neurodivergence report describes differences in planning and organising skills [2, p. 14]. Both main reports discuss flexibility, learning environments or changes between school stages [1, pp. 30-31; 2, pp. 24-27]. The examples below are questions, not measured findings.

Starting

COGAI question: what must the learner work out about where to begin, what to use and what finished work looks like?

Ordering steps

COGAI question: can the learner see the steps and their progress, or must they work these out and keep track without support?

Handling change

COGAI question: what new planning is needed when rooms, people, deadlines or formats change?

Moving between stages

The Curriculum Review identifies moves between school stages as a problem linked to the curriculum [1, pp. 30-31]. More research is needed about everyday changes during a school day.

COGAI suggestion to test

Try clear routines, notice before a change, previews of what will happen, visible step markers and clear ways to recover from problems. The sources support flexibility and attention to change, but do not prove that this exact set of ideas works.

What we still need to learn

National evidence says flexibility and moves between settings matter. We still need direct research to find out which types of support help different learners in different situations.



Made-up example

How barriers might build across a task

COGAI created this example to explain the idea. It is not a real person's story, an observed case or a research finding. It shows what someone could look at when reviewing a complete task.

1**Receive**

A homework task is announced verbally while the learner is packing away.

2**Locate**

The details are split between a classroom slide, learning platform and separate worksheet.

3**Interpret**

The task uses unfamiliar language and does not show an example or expected length.

4**Plan**

The learner must estimate time, gather materials and remember an unstated sequence.

5**Complete**

Notifications, sensory distraction and uncertainty compete with the core learning task.

6**Submit**

The upload route uses a different label and gives weak confirmation or recovery after error.

COGAI idea to test

In this made-up example, changing only the worksheet would not fix difficulties introduced at other steps. Research with real learners is needed to find out whether reviewing the whole task leads to better results.

Ideas suggested by COGAI

Areas a school could review

The source reports support meeting learners' needs, using flexible teaching and assessment, creating inclusive environments and removing communication barriers [2, pp. 17-27]. COGAI used that evidence to suggest the areas below. These ideas still need to be tested.

Teaching and learning [1, pp. 29, 46-50; 2, pp. 24-25]

Check the amount and order of content, how teaching is delivered, how a learner starts a task and whether expectations are clear. Test changes in the school before making wider claims.

Assessment [2, pp. 10, 24-25]

Check whether the format, time allowed or way of answering makes the task harder than the knowledge or skill being assessed. This report does not provide a tested review tool.

Communication [2, pp. 6, 14, 25-27]

Check whether pupils and families can understand important information and know what to do next. COGAI suggests this because the source reports raise concerns about communication barriers.

Digital systems: an area for research

Check sign-in, navigation, alerts, homework and what happens after an error. The main reports did not directly test these online journeys.

Environment [2, pp. 6, 25-27]

Check physical, social, sensory and communication barriers. People respond differently, so do not assume one change will help everyone.

Who is responsible: a COGAI suggestion

Make someone responsible for the work and use learners' experiences to test changes. This is a COGAI suggestion, not a finding from the source reports.

A review should identify strengths as well as barriers. It should not diagnose learners, rank individual teachers or claim that one adjustment benefits everyone.

An untested COGAI idea

Observe, understand, reduce, support and learn

COGAI developed this idea after reading sources [1] and [2]. Independent experts have not yet reviewed it. We do not yet know whether it is easy to use, gives consistent results or improves learners' experiences.

1. Look at the whole task

Write down what the learner meets before, during and after the task, including changes, tools, people and ways to get back on track.

2. Understand what the task asks of the learner

Look at what the learner must understand, notice, remember, plan, decide and manage.

3. Reduce what is not needed

Remove unclear wording, repeated work, unnecessary switching and extra memory work, while keeping the learning challenge.

4. Help each learner take part

Offer different routes, helpful prompts, technology, time and support to match the learner and the situation.

5. Learn from what happens

Test changes with learners, check whether they help, record any new problems and improve the approach over time.

Important limit

Keep the learning challenge, but check whether the system around it creates extra difficulty. Clear rules and proper testing are needed before this idea could be used to make a formal judgement about a school.

COGAI suggestions that need testing

Seven practical priorities

These are ideas to test, not proven ways to improve learning. Each note explains where the idea came from and what is still unknown.

1 Make hidden demands easier to see

COGAI suggests this because the reports describe barriers linked to curriculum design and learning environments [1, pp. 28-31; 2, pp. 24-27]. There is not yet a tested school review tool.

2 Review the whole learner journey

COGAI shows this idea in the made-up example on page 10. The main sources did not directly test this kind of journey review.

3 Make information clear and help people recover

One study supports testing whether related information should be brought together in suitable tasks [4]. More research is needed on helping learners recover after confusion or an error.

4 Offer flexible ways to take part

This agrees with the call for flexible teaching and assessment in [2, pp. 24-25]. The right type of flexibility will depend on the learner and situation.

5 Give staff knowledge and support

This agrees with the staff development priority in [2, pp. 22-24]. This report does not test or recommend a particular training course.

6 Listen to learners and families

This agrees with the source recommendation to include the views of learners and parents or carers [2, pp. 17-21].

7 Check benefits and new problems

COGAI suggests agreeing what success means before making a change. Future research must find out whether the change caused the result and whether it created new problems.

Limits of this report

What this report cannot prove

These limits apply to every conclusion and suggestion in this report. They are included so nobody presents the report as stronger proof than it is.

We did not review every study

We used two main government reports and two selected studies. We did not search every research database or formally rate every possible weakness in the evidence.

COGAI did not collect new information

COGAI did not observe lessons, interview people, collect school results or run an experiment for this report.

We cannot prove cause and effect

The report cannot prove that one design feature causes a particular result for an individual learner.

The COGAI approach has not been tested

The six areas and five-step approach are early ideas. Do not use them to give a score, diagnose a learner or officially approve a school.

People are different

Needs, strengths and responses vary. A finding about one age group, task, diagnosis or setting may not apply elsewhere.

No course or product is recommended

This report does not evaluate or recommend any COGAI training product. COGAI training was not evaluated as part of the evidence reviewed for this report.

What needs to happen next

Independent experts should review the approach. Learners, families and staff should help test it. Researchers should agree what success means before testing starts and publish the results even when there is no improvement.

Conclusion

We need to study cognitive access directly

The evidence does not prove that England's National Curriculum is cognitively inaccessible. It does support looking at how the organisation and delivery of the curriculum, assessment and learning environments may affect different learners [1, pp. 28-31; 2, pp. 14, 24-27].

COGAI's overall view

The evidence suggests that some learners may face extra mental effort between being given access and being able to take part successfully. This report cannot tell us how common these barriers are, prove what causes them or show which changes work.

What research should do next

Ask learners where they face avoidable difficulty. Separate the learning challenge from extra difficulty created by the task or system. Agree what to measure before testing changes. Also check staff workload and any new problems.

What we can say now

Official reviews say that the organisation and amount of curriculum content, flexibility, environments, communication, assessment and changes between stages matter for inclusion [1; 2]. Two selected studies support looking at working memory and attention split between sources in specific tasks [3; 4].

What we cannot say now

This report cannot approve a school, diagnose a learner, give one score for mental effort, say how common the barriers are or claim that the COGAI approach improves learning.

A sensible next step

Treat the approach as an early idea for research. Publish the test plan, involve learners and education staff, check whether it is practical and whether different reviewers reach similar results, agree what success means and remove ideas that the evidence does not support.

Sources and openness

Sources used in this report

References [1] and [2] are the two main government reports. References [3] and [4] are selected research studies used only for the claims linked to them. Using these four sources does not mean we reviewed all research on the subject.

[1] Curriculum and Assessment Review. (2025). Curriculum and Assessment Review final report: Building a world-class curriculum for all.

Department for Education, published 5 November 2025. Cited findings use the report's printed page numbers.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report

[2] Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group. (2026). The Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group report.

Department for Education, published 23 February 2026. Cited findings use the report's printed page numbers.

www.gov.uk/government/publications/neurodivergence-task-and-finish-group-report

[3] Gathercole, S. E., Pickering, S. J., Knight, C., and Stegmann, Z. (2004). Working memory skills and educational attainment: evidence from national curriculum assessments at 7 and 14 years of age.

Applied Cognitive Psychology, 18(1), 1-16. The study found links between some results. A link alone does not prove that one thing caused another or that a particular change will work.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.934>

[4] Chandler, P., and Sweller, J. (1992). The split-attention effect as a factor in the design of instruction.

British Journal of Educational Psychology, 62(2), 233-246. The two experiments studied specific learning tasks. Do not assume the findings apply to every learner or every type of information.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1992.tb01017.x>

Who wrote this and possible interests

COGAI wrote and paid for this report. COGAI carries out research and sells services and professional learning about cognitive accessibility. COGAI could gain recognition or income if more people use this idea. This report does not recommend or test a COGAI product. The Department for Education and the authors of references [3] and [4] did not ask for or approve this report.

Accuracy, corrections and feedback

COGAI has taken reasonable care to check the information, references and page numbers in this report. However, errors or omissions may remain. This report is provided for general information and should not replace professional or specialist advice.

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