IMPACT REPORT
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Use and perceived contribution of the Sounds of Intent Framework in UK special schools



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1 Executive summary

Despite increasing recognition of the importance of inclusive music education, limited evidence is available concerning how musical development is understood, supported and assessed in UK special schools. The Sounds of Intent Framework was developed to address this need, enabling practitioners to recognise and map musical engagement and development among learners with diverse abilities and needs. This research project investigated the extent and nature of the use of the Sounds of Intent Framework in special school settings across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It complements the PROMISE 2026 report (Sellers et al., 2026) and comprises two studies that examine the perceived contribution of the Framework to educational practice and the factors affecting its implementation. Study 1 was a survey of practitioners working in UK special schools (n=82). Study 2 collected qualitative data from practitioners through focus groups (n=13). Just over half of survey respondents (42 of 82; 51%) reported using the Sounds of Intent Framework in their work in special schools; however, the sample was weighted predominantly to England, so results should not be inferred as being representative of the whole UK. Fifty-six per cent of respondents answering the curriculum question (34 of 61) reported using Sounds of Intent-informed curricula. Aside from curriculum planning, the Framework was reported to support the recognition of learners' musical abilities, formative assessment, and the recording of musical development. It also underpinned access to formal recognition through the Trinity Awards and Certificates in Musical Development. Focus group participants particularly valued the shared language that the Framework provided and its capacity to make subtle or unconventional forms of musical engagement visible. Implementation of the Framework was not consistent, however, and was influenced by access to specialist training, staff confidence, leadership support, time, funding, and the integration of the Framework into schools' existing recording systems. Wider music provision also varied considerably between settings.

The findings provide evidence of the use and perceived contribution of the Sounds of Intent Framework while identifying the conditions required for its more consistent implementation. Further research should examine its use in a larger and more representative UK-wide sample, including mainstream settings many of which support children with diverse abilities and needs, and evaluate its effect on teaching practice and pupils' musical development over time.

2 Key findings

2.1 The Sounds of Intent Framework is used across the UK special school settings represented in the study, although its adoption and implementation vary.

Just over half of survey respondents (42 of 82; 51%) reported using the Sounds of Intent Framework, with use reported across all four UK nations. Of the 61 respondents answering the curriculum question, 34 (56%) reported using a Sounds of Intent-informed curriculum. These included 27 of 30 self-reported Framework users and 7 of 31 non-users. This suggests that reported curriculum use and practitioners' identification as Framework users do not always coincide.

2.2 The Framework supports several interconnected aspects of educational practice, extending beyond assessment.

Practitioners reported using the Framework to recognise pupils' musical engagement and abilities, personalise teaching, inform curriculum planning, undertake formative assessment, and record musical development.

2.3 The Sounds of Intent Framework helps practitioners recognise and value musical abilities that may otherwise be overlooked.

Focus group participants particularly valued the Framework's strengths-based approach to identifying musical engagement and development among learners with diverse abilities and needs. Its developmental descriptors enabled practitioners to recognise subtle or unconventional musical behaviours, identify emerging capabilities, and consider opportunities for further progression.

2.4 The Framework underpins opportunities for formal recognition of musical achievement.

Seventeen survey respondents reported offering the Trinity Awards and Certificates in Musical Development, which are underpinned by Sounds of Intent. Focus group participants valued these pupil qualifications as opportunities to recognise achievements that conventional pathways might overlook. They also valued the Sounds of Intent Awards for Schools as a means of recognising and developing school provision.

2.5 Training, staff confidence and organisational resources influence the implementation and sustained use of the Sounds of Intent Framework.

Implementation was shaped by access to professional development, leadership support, staffing, time, and the demands of recording assessment evidence. Class teachers were the most frequently reported providers of music (48 of 61 respondents; 79%), highlighting the importance of supporting non-music specialists. However, only 36 of 62 respondents (58%) reported access to external events or specialist music CPD, while half of those reporting their annual CPD budget (18 of 36) indicated that £0–£200 was available. Focus group accounts illustrate how these wider constraints could affect the use of the Framework.

2.6 The wider organisation of music provision shapes opportunities for pupils' musical development and the implementation of the framework.

Participants described considerable variation in access to specialist teaching, external partnerships, instruments, resources, and appropriate teaching spaces. Music was also widely used to support communication, transitions, emotional regulation, and wellbeing. The findings highlight the importance of distinguishing these valuable wider uses of music from educational opportunities specifically intended to develop pupils' musical understanding and abilities.

3 Introduction

This document reports the findings of a subset of research questions from a recent study called PROMISE 2026 (Sellers et al., 2026) evaluating the current state of music education in UK special schools. PROMISE 2026 is the third survey of music provision in special schools in England and updates the 2001 and 2016 publications (Welch et al., 2001, 2016). The subset of questions analysed in this report relates to the Sounds of Intent Framework (Welch et al., 2009) and the use across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The study was undertaken by researchers at the University of Roehampton, Natalie Cairns-Ratter, Sarah McCarthy, and Professor Adam Ockelford in collaboration with colleagues from University College London, Professor Graham Welch, and Ben Sellers.

The aim of this report is to understand the use of the Sounds of Intent Framework, how the Framework has supported practice and the conditions enabling or constraining implementation of the Framework. The research questions were:

To what extent, and in what ways, is the Sounds of Intent Framework used in UK special schools?

How do practitioners perceive the Framework's contribution to recognising, planning for, assessing, and reporting pupils' musical development?

What organisational, professional, and material factors enable or constrain its use?

How does the wider pattern of music provision in special schools shape opportunities to implement the Framework?

3.1 Terminology

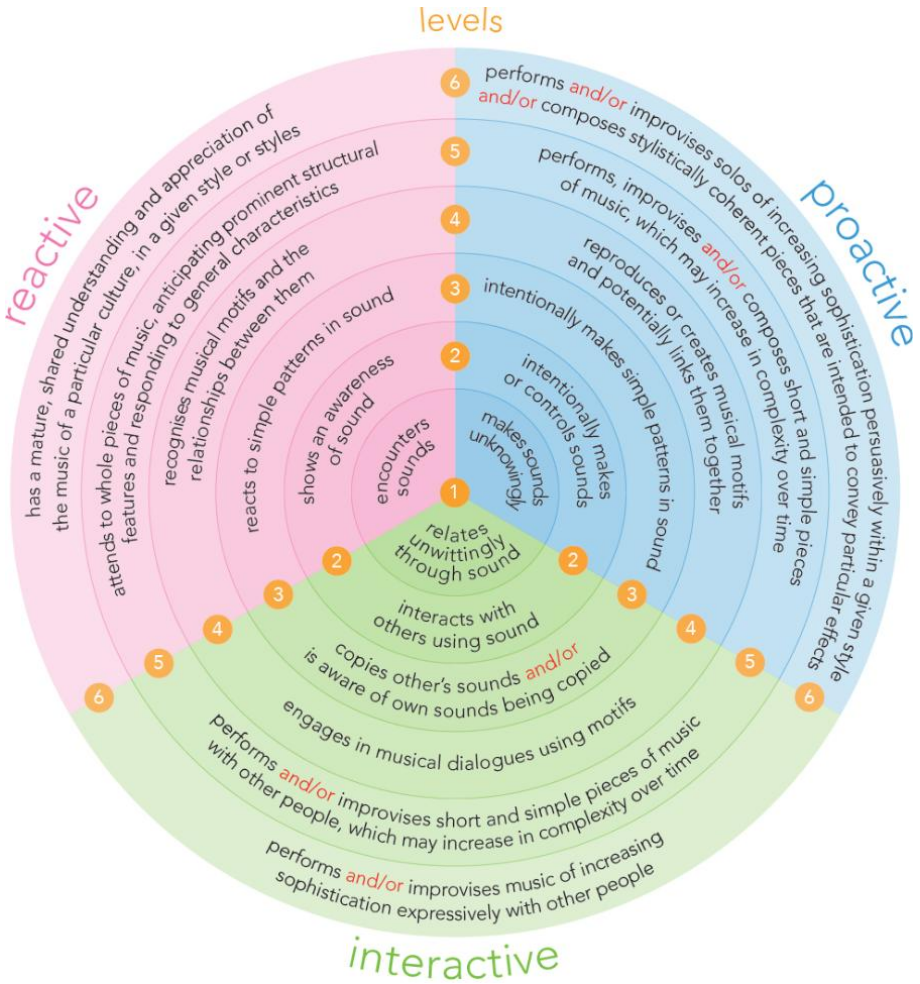
Across the UK, different terminology is used to describe children and young people who require additional support in education, including special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in England, additional support needs (ASN) in Scotland, additional learning needs (ALN) in Wales and special educational needs (SEN) in Northern Ireland. Recognising these differences, this report uses the term 'learners with diverse abilities and needs' when referring collectively to children and young people educated in special schools. This terminology reflects the strengths-based approach underpinning the Sounds of Intent Framework, which prioritises recognising individual musical capabilities and potential while acknowledging differences in learning and support needs.

3.2 Context

3.2.1 The Sounds of Intent Framework

The Sounds of Intent Framework (Welch et al., 2009) (Sounds of Intent) is rooted in the dual perspectives of music education and music psychology. It is empirically derived and sets out an inclusive account of musical engagement and development in children and young people across the spectrum of neurodiversity. It maps participants' capacity to engage in musical activities across three domains: reactive, proactive, and interactive, as well as six developmental levels, extending from early encounters with sound to advanced music-making (see Figure 1). The strengths-based approach of the Framework enables practitioners to identify what a learner can already do musically, recognise emerging capabilities, and consider how further musical development may be supported.

Figure 1 The Sounds of Intent Framework



3.2.2 Steps towards inclusive music education

Important developments have occurred in breaking down societal barriers and promoting access to music education for learners with diverse abilities and needs. In England, a major policy development has been the introduction of inclusion as a strategic pillar in the revised National Plan for Music Education (Department for Education (DfE) & Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), 2022). Guidance to support curriculum development in special schools for inclusive music-making has also been developed (Sellers & Anderson, 2024). However, gaps remain in understanding how consistently pupils across special schools have access to effective music education (Welch et al., 2016), and in representing the musical experiences and preferences of learners with complex needs, particularly those who do not communicate through speech (Burland, 2020).

A new qualifications framework, underpinned by the Sounds of Intent Framework and provided by Trinity College London, provides access to nationally recognised musical qualifications for young people who previously faced barriers to traditional music qualifications due to their disabilities. This partnership represents a positive development towards more equitable access to music education and recognition of musical achievement. Both organisations provide differentiated administration routes for the awards. Trinity College London support validated centres to apply for the awards directly (Trinity College London). Sounds of Intent provide a National Sounds of Intent Centre (National Sounds of Intent Centre) for practitioners who are not affiliated with a validated centre, thereby widening access to the qualifications.

3.2.3 Special schools in the UK

Special schools provide education for learners with diverse abilities and needs, including autistic learners and those with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). Table 1 provides snapshots of special school

provision across the UK. These figures have different dates and definitions and should not be combined into a UK total.

Table 1 Special school provision across the UK

Nation	Reported special school count	Source
England	1,123 schools with reported capacity in May 2024	DfE (2026a)
Scotland	107 publicly funded special schools in 2024	Audit Scotland (2025)
Wales	39 local authority-maintained special schools in January 2025	Welsh Government (2025)
Northern Ireland	40 special schools in 2024/25	Northern Ireland Audit Office (2026)

Note. England's figure counts special schools for which local authorities reported capacity in May 2024. Scotland's figure relates to publicly funded special schools in 2024; Wales's figure to local authority-maintained special schools in January 2025; and Northern Ireland's figure to special schools in 2024/25.

3.2.4 Specialist provision in mainstream settings

In January 2025, over 1.7 million pupils in England had special educational needs, including 482,640 pupils with education, health, and care (EHC) plans (Department for Education, 2025). These are school-pupil counts, rather than counts of all children and young people aged 0–25 with EHC plans. Many pupils with SEN attend mainstream schools, including specialist provision within mainstream settings. The Schools White Paper (Department for Education, 2026b) indicates a continued emphasis on inclusive mainstream provision.

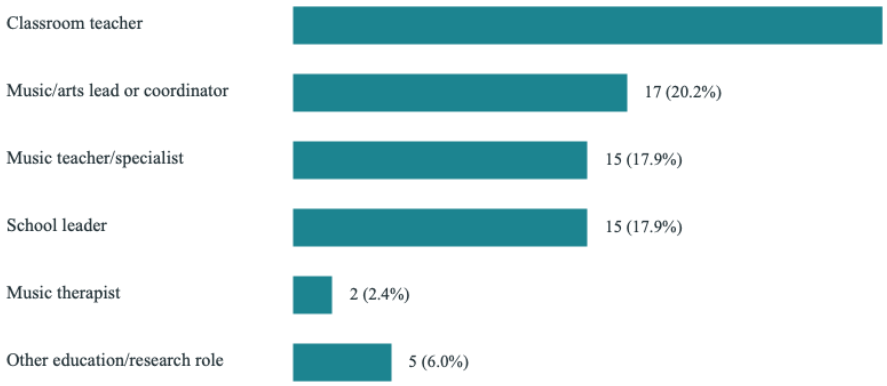
The distinction between special schools and specialist provision within mainstream schools is not always clear, particularly in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2025), as reflected in the focus-group responses in this study. This highlights the importance of ensuring that music education research captures the range of settings providing inclusive music education across the UK.

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

Participants (N=84) were practitioners working in or with special schools in the UK (see Figure 2 for survey participants' roles). Participants were recruited using a third-party mailing list of contacts in special schools, via researchers' networks, and using social media. Separate recruitment processes were used for study 1 (n=82) and study 2 (n=13) to broaden the participant base. Nonetheless, 11 of the focus group participants completed the survey. Participants provided informed consent after having been provided with an online information sheet. Ethics approval for the project was received from the University of Roehampton.

Figure 2 Survey participants by role



Note. n = 84. Note. 82 survey participants and 13 focus group participants; 11 took part in both studies.

4.2 Study design

A mixed-methods research design was chosen. Study 1 (n=82) used an online survey hosted via Qualtrics to gain a broad understanding of music provision in UK special schools and to what extent the Sounds of Intent Framework was being used. The survey took around 10 minutes to complete. Results were analysed descriptively. Only questions pertinent to the use and impact of Sounds of Intent are included in this report.

Study 2 (n=13) deployed focus groups to gather qualitative data to explore individual practitioners' experience of the Sounds of Intent Framework. Four online focus groups were conducted, each lasting 45 minutes to an hour. Focus groups were segmented by region; two for professionals from England and Scotland (n=8), one for professionals from Wales (n=2) and one for professionals in Northern Ireland (n=3). Focus group transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). A primarily deductive approach was adopted, using the four research questions to guide the initial organisation of the data. Within these broad areas, categories were developed and refined inductively to capture participants' experiences and perspectives. Relevant extracts were coded and grouped into categories describing how the Sounds of Intent Framework was used, its perceived contribution to practice, factors influencing implementation and the wider context of music provision. Illustrative quotations were selected to demonstrate the range of experiences reported by participants.

5 Survey findings

The survey findings are presented first, followed by the focus group findings in Section 6. Of the 82 survey participants, 61 completed the full survey. Available responses from incomplete submissions were retained, so the denominator varies between questions and is reported for each item. The figures describe respondents' reports, not school-level or national adoption estimates.

5.1 Reach and adoption

Just over half of survey respondents (51%) (42/82) reported using the Sounds of Intent Framework in their work in special schools. In England, 36 of 73 (49%) of respondents reported use of the framework. Whilst these figures do not provide a population-wide adoption rate for UK special schools, they do indicate that the Framework is being used in all the UK nations.

Table 2 Framework use by respondents' nation

Nation	Respondents	Reported users
England	73	36 (49%)
Scotland	2	2 (100%)
Wales	4	1 (25%)
Northern Ireland	3	3 (100%)
Total	82	42 (51%)

Note. n = 82. Small numbers outside England do not support reliable comparisons between nations.

Music teachers and specialists reported the highest level of Framework use (11 of 15; 73%). Just over half of classroom teachers (16 of 30; 53%) reported using the Sounds of Intent Framework, compared with 8 of 17 music/arts leads (47%) and 6 of 15 school leaders (40%). This suggests that the Framework is used across a range of professional roles, rather than exclusively by music specialists.

Table 3 Framework use by respondents' role

Role	Respondents	Reported users	Not using
Music teacher or specialist	15	11 (73%)	4 (27%)
Music or arts lead	17	8 (47%)	9 (53%)
Classroom teacher	30	16 (53%)	14 (47%)
School leader	15	6 (40%)	9 (60%)
Music therapist	2	0 (0%)	2 (100%)
Other	3	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
Total	82	42 (51%)	40 (49%)

Note. n = 82.

Reported use extended across several professional roles. The survey does not establish the level of use among all practitioners in these roles.

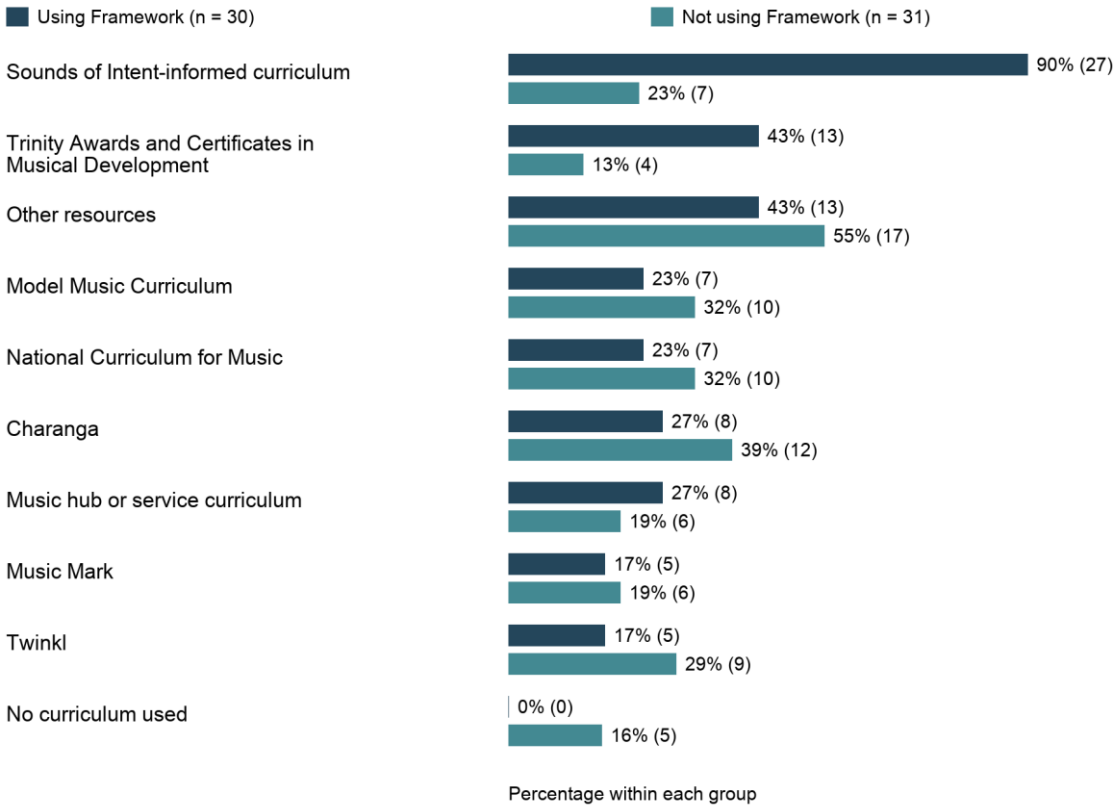
5.2 Educational practice

5.2.1 Curriculum

Of the 30 self-reported Framework users answering the curriculum question, 27 (90%) selected a Sounds of Intent-informed curriculum. Seven of the 31 non-users answering the same question (23%) also selected this option. Overall, 34 of 61 respondents (56%) reported using a Sounds of Intent-informed curriculum. This suggests that reported curriculum use and identification as a Framework user do not always coincide. Possible explanations include school-wide curriculum adoption, visiting practitioners' experiences across settings, or differences in how respondents interpreted the questions. The survey does not distinguish between these explanations.

The survey also shows that practitioners using Sounds of Intent are also using other curriculum resources (see Figure 3 for details). The Sounds of Intent Framework may therefore be used alongside other approaches, supporting adaptation to the diverse abilities and needs of pupils.

Figure 3 Curriculum resources by reported Framework use



Note. n = 61 (30 users and 31 non-users). Percentages use the item responses in each group. Multiple selections were permitted.

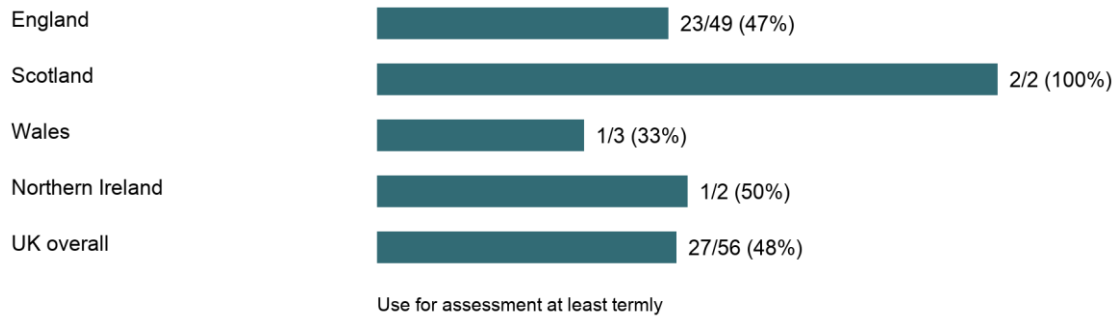
5.2.2 Assessment and recognition of learning

Across the four UK nations, 27 of the 56 respondents (48%) reported using the Sounds of Intent Framework to assess pupils' musical development at least termly, including weekly and monthly use. Country by country, in England, 23 of 49 respondents (47%) reported using the Framework for assessment at least termly. The Framework was also used for assessment by respondents in Scotland (2 of 2), Wales (1 of 3) and Northern Ireland (1 of 2). See Figure 4.

These findings suggest that the Sounds of Intent Framework contributes to assessment practices across the UK, although its use is not universal. This is particularly significant given that the Framework was designed to support practitioners in recognising, understanding, and assessing musical engagement and development among learners with diverse abilities and needs.

Some practitioners also reported using the Framework alongside other assessment platforms, including Evidence for Learning. This suggests that the Framework can complement existing school systems for recording and evidencing pupils' progress.

Figure 4 Use of the Framework for assessment at least termly



Note. n = 56. Percentages use respondents answering this item. The small national subsamples do not support reliable comparisons between nations.

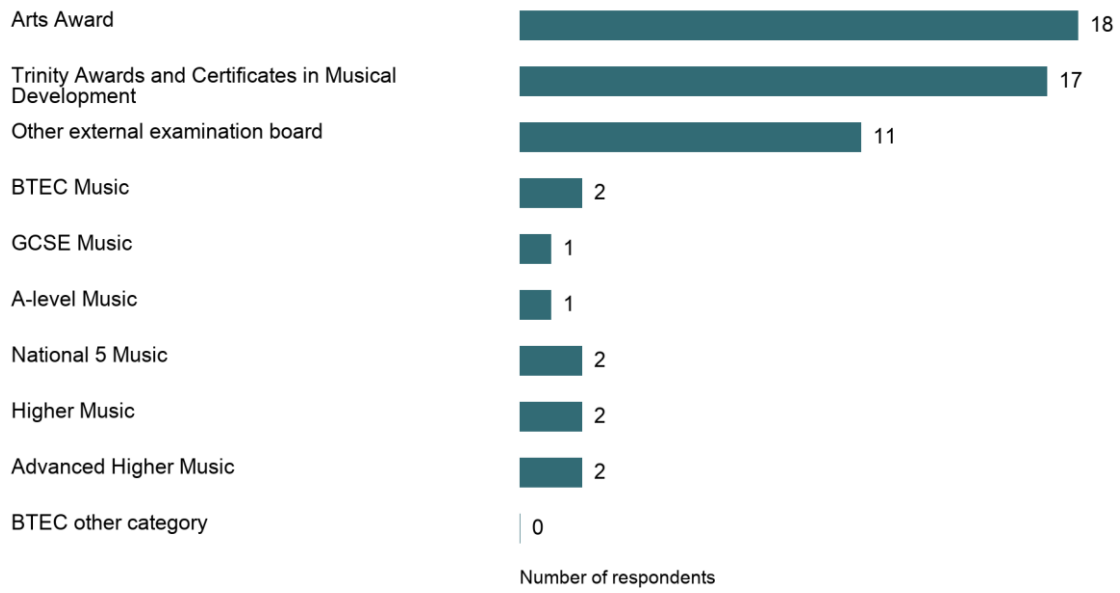
5.2.3 Formal recognition of musical development

The survey also explored the music qualifications practitioners offer to pupils in special schools (Figure 5). Eighteen respondents reported offering Arts Award, while 17 reported offering the Trinity College London Awards and Certificates in Musical Development ('ACMD'). Other qualifications offered included external examination board awards (11 respondents), BTEC Music (2), GCSE Music (1) and A-level Music (1), alongside Scottish qualifications.

These findings highlight the range of opportunities practitioners are using to acknowledge and celebrate musical achievement, including qualifications that may be more accessible to learners with additional needs. The Trinity College London ACMDs are underpinned by the Sounds of Intent Framework.

Taken together, the findings indicate that the Sounds of Intent Framework contributes to a broader approach to recognising musical development, encompassing ongoing assessment, documentation of progress, and opportunities for accreditation.

Figure 5 Music qualifications offered

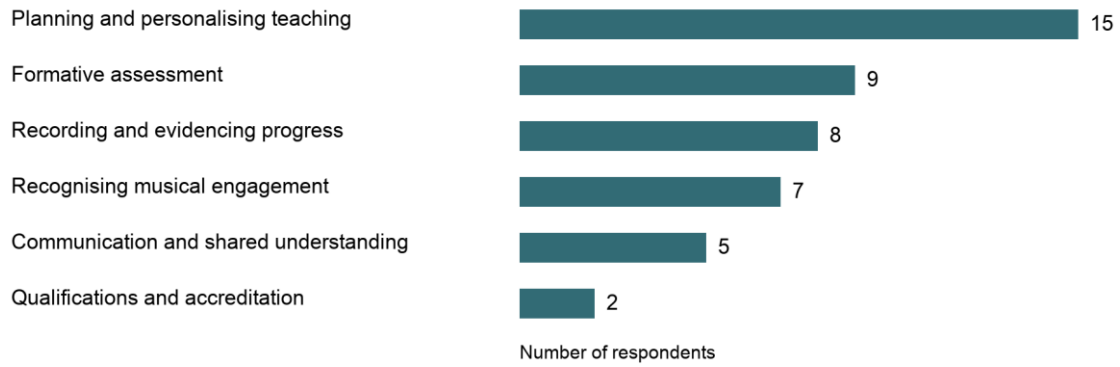


5.2.4 Further uses of the Framework

Analysis of open-text survey responses identified several ways in which practitioners were using the Sounds of Intent Framework. The most frequently identified purpose was planning and personalising teaching (15 respondents), followed by formative assessment (9), recording and evidencing progress (8), and recognising pupils' musical engagement and abilities (7). Respondents also described using the Framework to develop shared understanding among staff (5) and to support qualifications and accreditation (2). Figure 6 presents the numbers of respondents mentioning each use.

These findings suggest that the Framework contributes to a range of interconnected educational practices, extending beyond broad curriculum planning and pupil assessment to support individualised teaching, recognition of musical development and the documentation of pupils' achievements.

Figure 6 Reported uses of the Framework



5.3 Engagement among non-users

Forty survey participants reported that they were not currently using the Sounds of Intent Framework. Some nevertheless supplied open-text accounts of engagement with it, describing exploration of its introduction, curriculum development, or informal use to inform teaching and assessment.

Participants also described previous use that had subsequently been discontinued or reduced, including following changes in school leadership. These findings suggest that the distinction between users and non-users is not always clear-cut. The Framework may influence practice even if it is not formally embedded.

5.4 Barriers and enablers

Survey responses provided insights into factors that may influence the adoption and sustained use of the Sounds of Intent Framework. Although barriers were not systematically measured, open-text responses identified training, leadership support, and assessment workload as potential constraints.

One respondent indicated that use of the Framework was limited to a small number of teachers who had received training, while another reported that its use had been scaled back following a change in senior leadership. Assessment workload was also identified as a concern by a respondent who did not use the Framework.

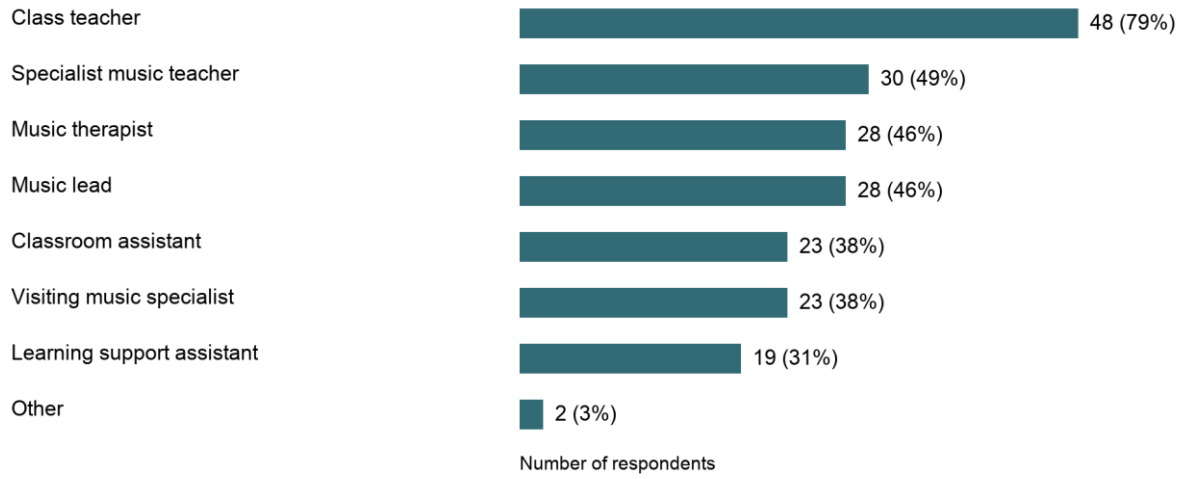
Conversely, some practitioners described exploring the Framework or developing Sounds of Intent-informed curricula, suggesting that implementation may be an ongoing process rather than a straightforward distinction between users and non-users.

Access to specialist training is particularly relevant given the key role of non-music specialists in delivering music education in special schools. Class teachers were the most frequently reported providers of music (48 of 61 respondents; 79%), compared with specialist music teachers (30; 49%). Classroom assistants (23; 38%) and learning support assistants (19; 31%) also contributed to music provision (Figure 7). Of 62 respondents answering the external CPD question, 36 (58%) reported access to external events or specialist music CPD. However, limited reported budgets may constrain opportunities for professional development. Among 36

respondents who reported their annual music continuing professional development (CPD) budget, half (18; 50%) selected £0–£200. Although this does not directly measure access to Sounds of Intent training, it provides context for the resource constraints that may affect implementation.

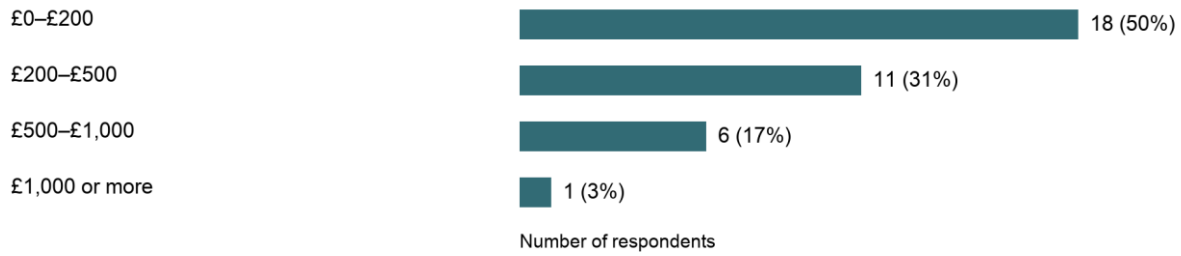
Together, these findings suggest that training, staff confidence, organisational support, and assessment workload may influence the adoption and sustained use of Sounds of Intent, particularly in settings where music is delivered by practitioners without specialist music training.

Figure 7 Who provides music in participating settings



Note. n = 61. Multiple selections were permitted. These are respondents' reports, not counts of distinct schools.

Figure 8 Annual budget available for music CPD



6 Focus group findings

Four online focus groups were conducted with 13 practitioners working in or with special schools and specialist educational provision across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) was used to explore participants' experiences of the Sounds of Intent Framework, its perceived contribution to practice, and the factors influencing its implementation.

Four interrelated themes were identified: (1) recognising and supporting musical development; (2) translating the Framework into educational practice; (3) recognising musical achievement through accreditation; and (4) the organisational conditions shaping implementation.

6.1 Recognising and supporting musical development

A central theme was the value of the Sounds of Intent Framework in helping practitioners recognise and describe musical behaviours among learners with diverse abilities and needs. Participants highlighted the importance of a developmental approach that acknowledges musical engagement beyond conventional expectations of singing, instrumental performance, or rhythmic accuracy.

The framework provided a shared language for describing musical responses and recognising emerging abilities, including those that might otherwise be overlooked. As one participant explained:

> *But we can look at the Framework, and we can pull out some of the descriptions and say, this is exactly what this child is doing. (P9)*

One participant emphasised the importance of recognising a broad range of musical engagement, including its interactive and expressive aspects:

> *'it's not about keeping in time with the pulse necessarily. It's not about those things. It's about intent, control, social, emotional, all of those things. (P6)*

This approach was considered particularly relevant for pupils whose musical engagement may be expressed through subtle responses to sound, vocalisations, movement, or interactions with others. The framework enabled practitioners to recognise these behaviours as meaningful aspects of musical development and provided a basis for identifying potential progression. This quotation represents a practitioner's interpretation; it should not be read as excluding rhythmic skills from musical development or equating musical development with general social and emotional outcomes.

6.2 Translating the Framework into educational practice

Participants described using the Sounds of Intent Framework in several related but distinct ways, including curriculum planning, formative assessment, observation and identifying next steps in musical learning. However, the extent to which the Framework was embedded in practice varied considerably between settings.

Some participants reported that the Sounds of Intent Framework underpinned their whole-school approach to music education. One practitioner stated:

> *Our curriculum is now completely based around the Sounds of Intent Framework. And then our assessment is according to Sounds of Intent as well. (P8)*

In other settings, the Framework was used selectively, particularly for pupils following sensory or informal curricula. For example, one participant estimated that approximately 15% of pupils in their school were currently assessed using the Sounds of Intent Framework, although plans were in place to extend its use.

Practitioners also described the Framework as a resource for non-music specialists, providing accessible developmental guidance that could inform teaching. One participant explained:

> *It helped massively to the staff to know how to plan and deliver those sessions. (P3)*

Another described how the Framework supported decisions about progression:

> *It also gives staff a backbone […] they can look at going right once they've done this, what is the next thing that I'm going to be either looking for or supporting the people or developing the people with? (P1)*

These accounts suggest that the Sounds of Intent Framework was valued not only as an assessment framework but also as a pedagogical resource. Its developmental structure helped practitioners identify musical goals and consider activities to support further learning. However, participants' accounts indicate that using the Framework to inform practice did not necessarily mean that it was formally embedded in whole-school assessment systems.

6.3 Recognising musical achievement through accreditation

Participants valued two distinct forms of recognition: the Trinity Awards and Certificates in Musical Development, which recognise pupils' achievements, and the Sounds of Intent Awards for Schools, which recognise and support the development of school provision.

Practitioners particularly valued accreditation pathways that were accessible to learners whose achievements might not be recognised through conventional qualifications. One participant explained:

> *They won't, in some of the levels we're working at now, won't actually even get entry levels in English and maths, but they are able to get entry levels in music because they have the musical talent to do it. (P5)*

Participants also described how the structured requirements of the Awards for Schools supported planning and engagement with senior leaders. The awards provided clear objectives that could be translated into school development priorities, helping practitioners articulate what was required to strengthen music provision.

However, enthusiasm for accreditation was accompanied by concerns about the administrative demands of collecting and organising evidence. One practitioner explained:

> *We feel that in order to roll out those awards, we would need more support with like the kind of admin side of it, capturing the evidence, collating the evidence and that kind of thing. (P8)*

The findings suggest that accreditation was valued as a means of recognising pupils' musical abilities and raising the profile of music education. Nevertheless, its accessibility in practice depended partly on the capacity of schools to manage assessment and evidence requirements.

6.4 Organisational conditions shaping implementation

Although participants expressed positive views about the Sounds of Intent Framework, their accounts revealed several factors that constrained its consistent implementation. These included: staff confidence, access to professional development, time, staffing, resources, and compatibility with existing assessment systems.

The accessibility of the Framework was experienced differently by practitioners. Some described its language and developmental descriptors as straightforward and approachable, particularly for non-music specialists. Others reported that the full Framework could initially appear complex. One participant reflected:

> *'think the matrix is something that I had to think whether a few of them [staff] felt it was a bit overwhelming … It's more, I think, the confidence on the staff doing it and having those strategies. (P3)*

Professional development was therefore viewed as important not only for introducing practitioners to the Framework but also for developing confidence in interpreting musical behaviours and making assessment judgements.

Time and workload were recurring challenges. Participants described difficulties securing opportunities for training, observing pupils, completing assessments, and supporting colleagues. One practitioner commented:

> *I don't get any time to do it in school and then it just, yeah, it just doesn't get done, does it? (P13)*

The integration of the Sounds of Intent Framework with existing school assessment systems was another concern. Schools often used multiple frameworks to record curriculum learning, communication, engagement, and individual targets. Practitioners described the challenge of evidencing pupils' achievements across these different systems. As one participant explained:

> *So, I find it hard to evidence all of the EHP targets they're meeting, the communication targets and the Sounds of Intent when they're all in different places. (P2)*

The wider organisation of music provision also influenced opportunities to implement the Sounds of Intent Framework. Participants described considerable variation in access to specialist music teachers, external organisations, instruments, and suitable teaching spaces. In some settings, pupils accessed regular specialist-led lessons, performances and ensemble activities. Elsewhere, music provision relied more on classroom staff or visiting practitioners.

Participants also described the extensive use of music to support communication, transitions, emotional regulation, and wellbeing. One practitioner stated:

> *For us, music is used across the whole curriculum. So, for example, key parts of the day, we use it a lot for regulation.'(P3)*

Although these activities were valued, the accounts also highlighted a distinction between using music to support wider educational and pastoral purposes and providing opportunities specifically designed to develop pupils' musical understanding and abilities. A single activity may serve both purposes; the distinction concerns its intended learning goals and how musical development is supported and recognised.

Together, these findings suggest that the implementation of the Sounds of Intent Framework is shaped by the wider conditions of music education within schools. Access to the Framework alone does not ensure its sustained use. Practitioners require appropriate training, time, resources, and organisational support to incorporate it into planning, teaching, and assessment.

6.5 Summary of qualitative findings

Participants valued the Framework's developmental language and practical applications. Implementation depended on expertise, confidence, workload, leadership, and resources. These perceived contributions do not establish measurable improvements in teaching or pupils' musical development.

7 Limitations

The sample was recruited through mailing lists, professional networks and social media and was predominantly drawn from England. Prior interest in music education or Sounds of Intent may have influenced participation. The number of distinct schools and the extent of clustering of respondents within schools are not established. Findings therefore cannot be generalised to all UK special schools or used to estimate national adoption. The study examined reported experiences and perceptions, without directly measuring changes in practice or pupils' development.

Incomplete survey responses mean that denominators vary between questions and findings may be affected by non-response. The small samples outside England preclude reliable comparisons between nations. Eleven of the 13 focus group participants also completed the survey, so the two studies largely reflect the same practitioners' perspectives rather than independent groups. These limitations should inform interpretation of the reported benefits and implementation challenges.

8 Conclusions and implications

Practitioners in all four UK nations reported using the Sounds of Intent Framework. The study documents use of the Framework across participating settings but cannot establish how widespread or consistently embedded it is within the UK special school sector.

Practitioners described using the Framework to recognise musical behaviours, inform curriculum planning and assessment, record development, and communicate achievements. They particularly valued a strengths-based developmental language for recognising musical abilities that conventional approaches might overlook.

The Trinity Awards and Certificates in Musical Development provide a route to formal recognition underpinned by Sounds of Intent. Participants valued opportunities to acknowledge achievements that might not be recognised through conventional qualifications. The separate Sounds of Intent Awards for Schools were valued for supporting the development of provision.

Sustained implementation appeared to depend on training, staff confidence, leadership, time for observation and assessment, and compatibility with existing recording systems. Staffing, funding, facilities, instruments, technology, and external partnerships also shaped the opportunities available to pupils.

Participants reported using music for communication, transitions, regulation, and relaxation, alongside activities intended to develop musical understanding and abilities. An activity may support both musical and wider outcomes. Nevertheless, the presence of music throughout the school day does not, on its own, establish the extent of provision for musical development.

The sample was recruited through mailing lists, professional networks and social media and was predominantly drawn from England. Prior interest in music education or Sounds of Intent may have influenced participation. The number of distinct schools and the extent of clustering of respondents within schools are not established. Findings therefore cannot be generalised to all UK special schools or used to estimate national adoption. The study examined reported experiences and perceptions, without directly measuring changes in practice or pupil development.

The findings support conclusions about practitioners reported uses and perceived contributions of the Framework, and the conditions affecting implementation. Longitudinal and comparative research is needed to establish whether its use produces measurable changes in teaching, assessment, provision, or pupils' musical development.

8.1 Implications for practice

The findings suggest that implementation support should address the conditions in which practitioners work. Schools could introduce the Framework in manageable stages, combine introductory training with opportunities to discuss observations and assessment judgements, and protect time for planning and evidence collection. Integrating Sounds of Intent descriptors into existing recording systems may reduce duplicated work. Schools could also distinguish the evidence requirements for pupil qualifications from those for school awards, and plan administrative support accordingly. These are implications drawn from participants' accounts, rather than interventions evaluated by this study.

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10 Glossary

This report uses terminology that reflects current policy, legislation, and accepted professional practice within music education. Where terms have multiple interpretations, definitions adopted for this report are below.

10.1 Special schools

Special schools are schools designated to provide education for pupils with special educational needs or additional support or learning needs. Their organisation, designation and funding arrangements differ across the four UK nations. In England, categories include maintained special schools, special academies, non-maintained special schools and independent special schools.

10.2 Special educational needs and disabilities

SEND is the abbreviation used in England for special educational needs and disabilities. A child or young person has SEN where a learning difficulty or disability calls for special educational provision. Disability and SEN are overlapping categories, rather than interchangeable terms. The relevant framework includes the Children and Families Act 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice for ages 0–25.

10.3 Additional support needs

In Scotland, a child or young person has additional support needs where, for whatever reason, they are unable, or are likely to be unable, to benefit from school education without additional support. Needs may be temporary or longer term and may arise from the learning environment, family circumstances, disability or health needs, or social and emotional factors (Scottish Government, 2026).

10.4 Additional learning needs

In Wales, a person has additional learning needs where a learning difficulty or disability calls for additional learning provision. The relevant framework is the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 and the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021).

10.5 Special educational needs in Northern Ireland

SEN is the abbreviation used in Northern Ireland for special educational needs. It concerns learning difficulties that call for special educational provision. Northern Ireland has its own legislative and policy framework; England's SEND arrangements should not be assumed to apply.

10.6 Music education

For the purposes of this report, music education encompasses curriculum music, instrumental and vocal tuition, ensemble participation, creative music-making, music technology, performance opportunities, and other musical learning experiences provided during the school day or through school-supported enrichment activities.