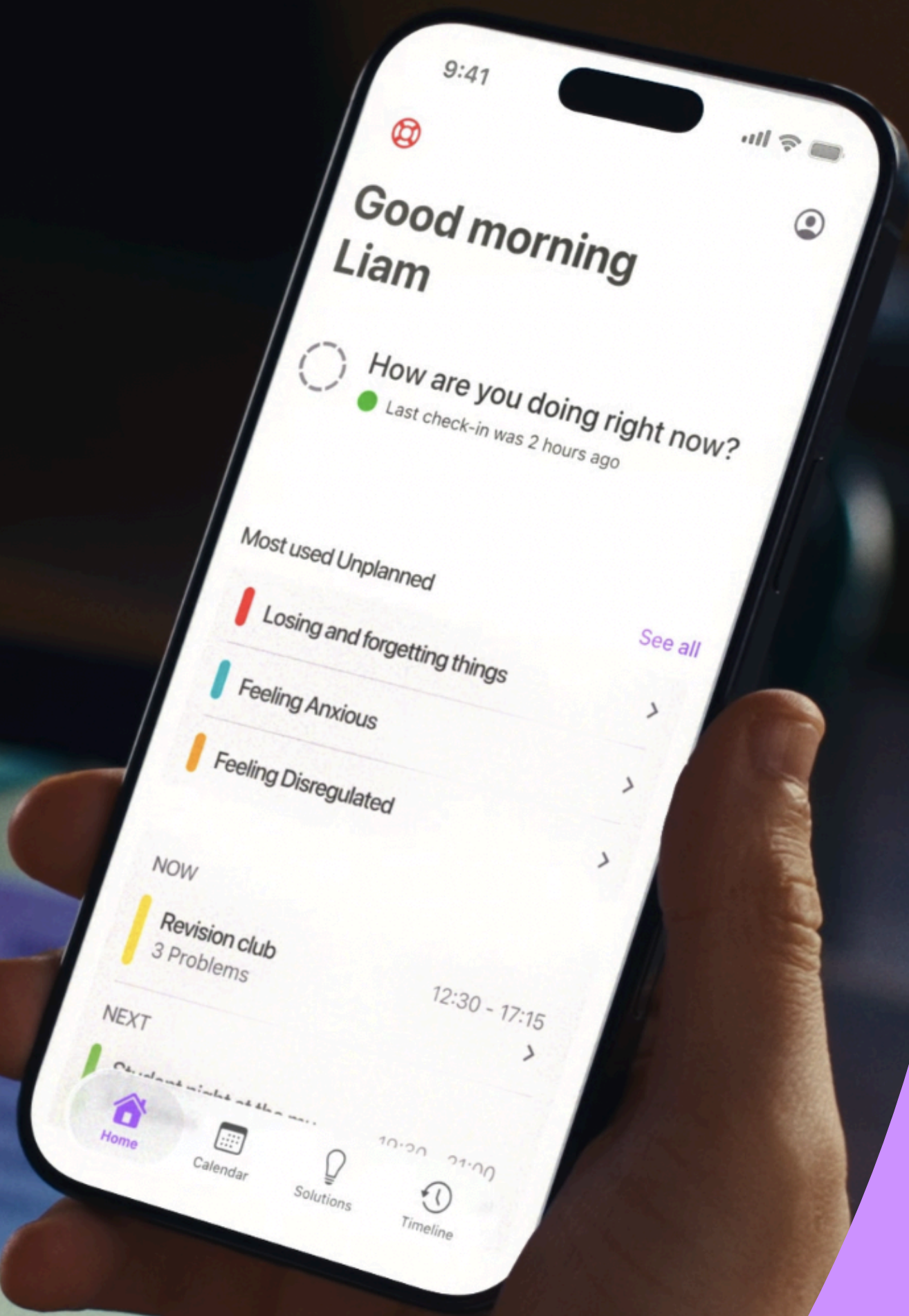


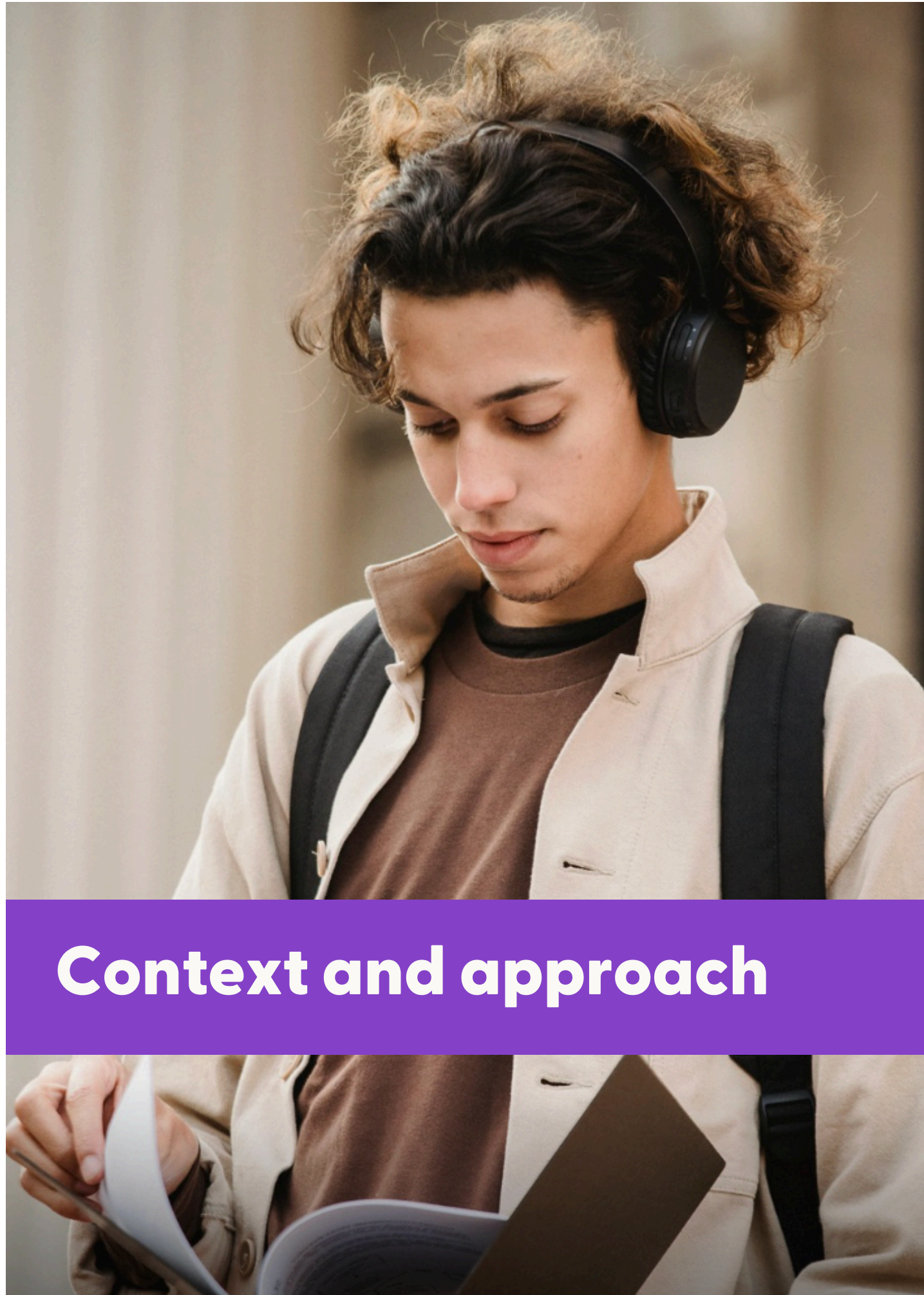
The Withdrawal of Support: Neurodivergent Student Voices on DSA Reform and the Risk to Higher Education Participation

May 2026

The Department for Education has proposed changes to Disabled Student Allowance (DSA), including a shift away from specialist tools towards free alternatives, with paid provision continuing only in “exceptional circumstances”. We asked DSA-funded users of Brain in Hand to give their views on these proposals. This report summarises what they told us.

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Context and approach

Context

The Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) currently funds a range of specialist assistive technologies and services designed to help disabled students participate in higher education. Recent proposals from the Department for Education to reform DSA funding suggest moving away from a model where assistive software is funded as standard, towards one where funding would only be provided if free alternatives cannot adequately meet a student's needs. For many software categories, funding would continue only in "exceptional circumstances" [1].

Brain in Hand (BiH) — a hybrid service combining app-based tools with specialist neurodivergent human support — is one such service that would fall under these proposed changes and may no longer be routinely funded through DSA.

In response to these proposals, BiH conducted a survey with current DSA-funded users to better understand how students perceive these changes and the impact they believe they would have on their wellbeing, independence, and participation in higher education. This report summarises what they told us, and considers what their experiences suggest for the wider sector.

What we did and who responded

BiH surveyed current DSA-funded users during May 2026, to explore perceptions of the proposed DSA reforms and the potential impact of replacing specialist support with free alternatives.


The survey combined quantitative questions with open-text responses, allowing students to describe both the practical and personal impact they believed removing BiH may have on their studies, wellbeing, and day-to-day functioning.

102 students responded with a range of support needs. Most participants had used BiH for a prolonged period, meaning findings largely reflect the experiences of students with sustained experience of using specialist neurodivergent support within higher education.

Participant characteristics

 **102**
Neurodivergent
DSA-funded respondents

 **63%**
Had used BiH for at least a
year; only 4% for less than 6
months

 Most participants described
overlapping
neurodivergence and mental
health support needs

Core finding

Respondents overwhelmingly described specialist neurodivergent support through BiH as fundamentally different from generic free tools. Participants repeatedly linked this support to emotional regulation, independence, crisis prevention, academic participation, and remaining in higher education. Students expressed significant concern about the potential impact these reforms could have on neurodivergent students' capacity to access and engage with university.

Headline stats

Students overwhelmingly expressed concern about replacing specialist neurodivergent support with free alternatives

76% said free tools would be **unlikely or not at all able to meet their needs** in the same way as BiH

61% said losing access would significantly affect their **mental health or wellbeing**.

33% said their **academic performance** would drop.

27% said they would consider **reducing their studies, taking a break, or leaving university altogether**.

“Losing access to this support would have a significant impact on my confidence, organisation, and ability to cope independently. I believe specialist support tools should remain funded because they provide practical and emotional support that free alternatives often cannot match.”

Findings - what students value about specialist support

1. Neurodivergent-informed design matters

Overall, **76% of 102 respondents said free tools would be unlikely or not at all able to meet their needs in the same way as BiH.**

Across responses, students consistently described specialist support as fundamentally different from generic wellbeing or productivity tools because it was experienced as being designed around neurodivergent needs. Rather than viewing BiH simply as “an app”, many participants described relying on an integrated combination of practical tools, emotional regulation strategies, and human support that helped them manage university life more independently.

Participants frequently linked this to:

- reduced cognitive and executive-function burden
- emotional regulation and self-management
- planning for uncertainty and transitions
- integrated support in one place
- and access to consistent human support during periods of stress or overwhelm

Many students explained that using several separate free tools would itself create additional stress and overwhelm, particularly during periods of dysregulation or uncertainty.

“There’s just nothing that offers the same support, guidance, functionality, and usefulness - definitely not in the same app, and to have five separate apps that still don’t work as well as Brain in Hand is just going to be overwhelming and impossible to many”

Several respondents also highlighted that the human support element was central to what made the support feel different from generic apps.

“You can’t trade out human support for an app. The whole point of Brain in Hand is it gives you the independence when you’re in a good place to manage your day, and personal support when you can’t.”

2. Support helped students maintain stability during periods of stress and uncertainty

Overall, 61% of respondents said losing access to BiH would significantly affect their mental health or wellbeing.

Rather than describing BiH as something used only during crisis, many students described it as helping them manage difficulties before they escalated, enabling them to remain stable, independent, and engaged during periods of stress or uncertainty. Participants repeatedly linked the support to managing anxiety and overwhelm, maintaining routines, reducing isolation, and preventing burnout or shutdown.

“There’s nothing that has the built in problem solving and coping strategies that work for me as an autistic person. BIH gives me the ability to plan for anxiety-inducing events without much effort and is a place I go to for certainty when I’m struggling in uncertain or new situations”.

Some students described the support as helping them sustain day-to-day functioning and cope more effectively with the ongoing pressures of university life.

“Not being able to use Brain in Hand will not only effect my studies but it will also effect the way in which I live day to day”.

Several participants also suggested that removing BiH would not eliminate support needs, but instead shift pressure elsewhere – including onto university services, mental health systems, carers, and family members.

“Brain in Hand is already a much cheaper alternative to having a human carer.”

The findings suggest that many students experience specialist neurodivergent support not simply as an optional wellbeing tool, but as support that helps them manage challenges, maintain independence, and remain engaged when difficulties arise.

3. Students linked support to both academic success and continued participation

Overall, 33% of respondents said losing access to BiH would negatively affect their academic performance.

27% said they would consider reducing their studies, taking a break, or leaving university altogether.

Across responses, students frequently linked BiH to their ability to manage academic demands, remain organised, maintain independence, and navigate periods of uncertainty or increased stress. While many participants anticipated a decline in their ability to perform at their best academically, others described support as being fundamental to their ability to remain engaged with higher education at all.

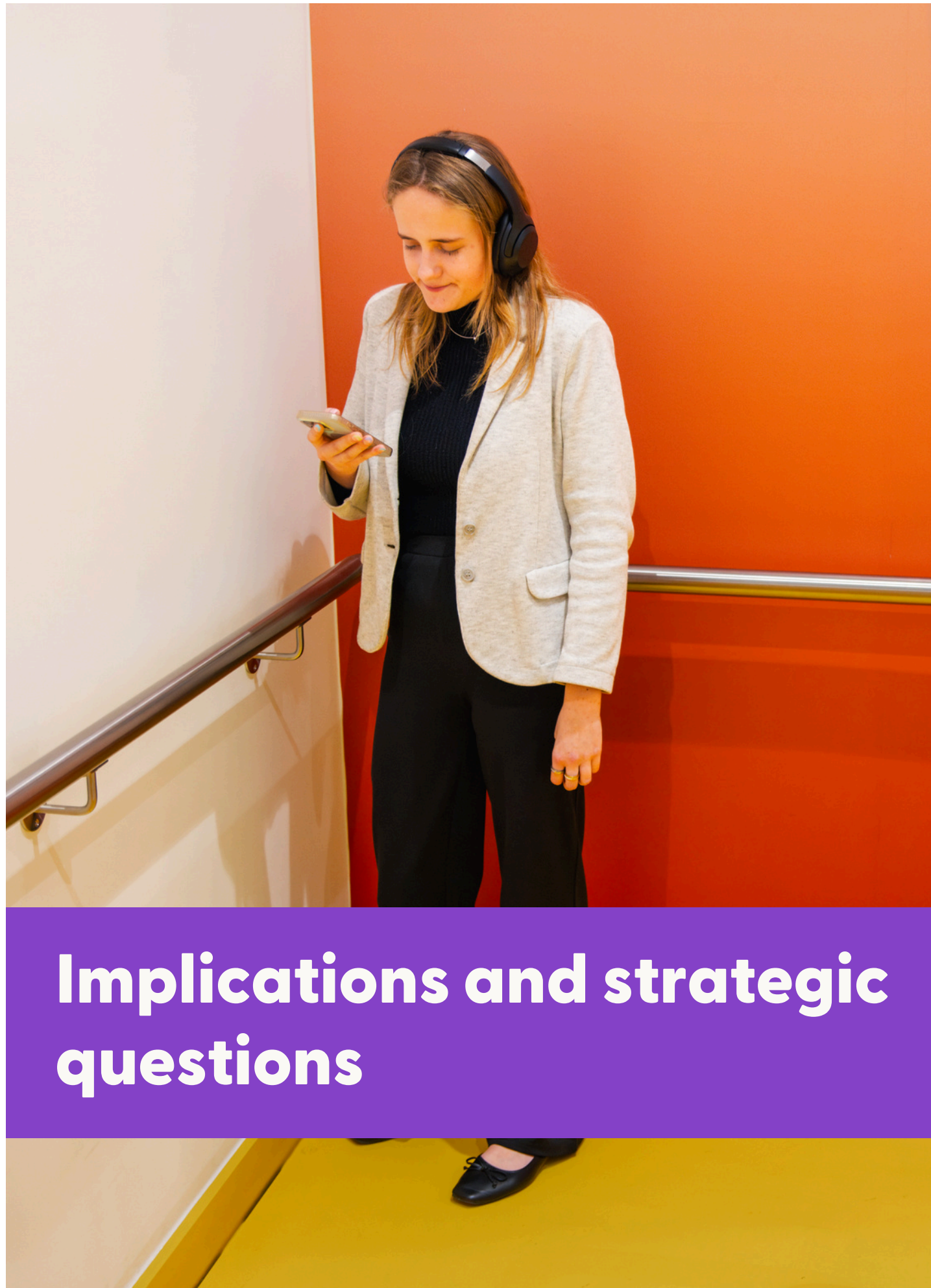
Several students described the support as especially important during periods of transition, uncertainty, or increased stress, helping them remain organised, regulated, and able to continue studying.

“Without brain in hand, I would have stopped my studies and would not have even considered further study to the postgraduate level. Without brain in hand, I would not have successfully transitioned to a year in industry and paid employment, and then back to my studies for my final year“

Others directly linked the support to remaining in higher education at all.

“Brain in Hand is one of the only things keeping me in university. I cannot continue my studies without it.”

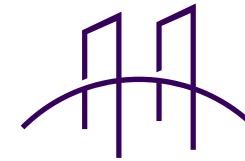
Taken together, the findings suggest many students experience specialist neurodivergent support not as an optional enhancement, but as part of the infrastructure that enables them to remain and excel in higher education.



Implications and strategic questions

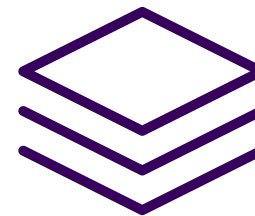
What do these findings suggest?

These findings come from students using one specific tool – Brain in Hand – but the patterns they reveal have implications that extend well beyond any single product. The responses point to something more fundamental: that for many neurodivergent students, specialist and hybrid support tools are not optional enhancements to university life, but core to enabling academic success and continuity.



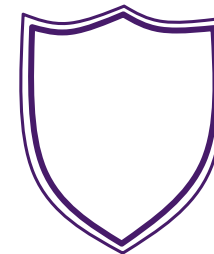
Specialist support functions as participation infrastructure.

Many students described specialist support not simply as assistive technology, but as part of the infrastructure that enables them to stay and thrive in higher education. Across responses, students linked support to independence, emotional regulation, academic participation, and remaining engaged with university life.



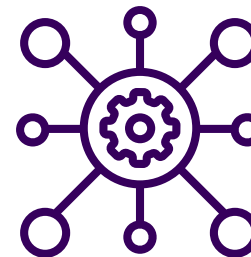
Functional similarity may not equal meaningful equivalence.

The findings raise questions about whether free alternatives can be considered equivalent based solely on isolated features or functions. Students repeatedly described the value of specialist support as lying in integrated, neurodivergent-informed systems combining practical tools, emotional regulation strategies, predictability, and human support.



Supporting students early can reduce wider system pressures.

Many students described support as helping them manage difficulties before they escalated into crisis, disengagement, or loss of independence. Several responses suggested that reducing access to specialist support may not remove support needs, but instead shift pressure onto universities, mental health services, carers, and wider support systems.



The wider impact extends beyond BiH alone.

This survey explored perceptions relating specifically to Brain in Hand. However, many students access multiple forms of specialist assistive technology and support simultaneously. As a result, the cumulative impact of reducing access across multiple specialist supports may be substantially greater than reflected in these findings alone.

Implications for higher education

The findings suggest that proposed reductions in access to specialist neurodivergent support may have implications extending beyond individual students alone.

Increased pressure on university support systems

Many students described BiH as helping them manage difficulties before they escalated into crisis or disengagement. Reduced access to specialist support may therefore increase pressure on disability services, wellbeing provision, counselling, pastoral systems, and academic support teams - which are already increasingly stretched. [2]

Risks to participation and continuation

The findings suggest that for some neurodivergent students, specialist support is closely linked to remaining engaged with higher education. Universities with growing neurodivergent student populations may therefore need to consider how reductions in specialist support could affect participation, progression, and continuation, along with the costs associated with student drop-out.

Questions around accessibility and reasonable adjustment

Students repeatedly described generic free tools as difficult to integrate, navigate, or rely upon during periods of stress or overwhelm. Institutions have duties under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students [3]. If DSA no longer funds the tools that enable those adjustments to function in practice, the responsibility – and potential liability – may shift more directly to institutions. This raises important questions about who bears the cost when national funding frameworks withdraw.

Implications for policy

The findings also raise broader questions about how specialist support is assessed, funded, and evaluated within the proposed reforms.

The "free alternative" question needs reframing.

The proposed reforms assume that if a free tool exists that performs a similar function, funding for specialist alternatives is not justified. But this survey – and the broader evidence base on neurodivergent experience – suggests that functional equivalence cannot be assessed by feature comparison alone. The question is not whether a free tool exists, but whether it can deliver equivalent outcomes for students whose needs are shaped by how they process information, regulate emotion, and manage uncertainty. That is a much higher bar, and one that deserves proper assessment.

Neurodivergent students are not a homogeneous group.

The students in this survey described highly individual relationships with their tools – different tools mattered for different reasons, in different contexts, at different points in their studies. A reforms framework that does not accommodate this individualisation risks applying a blunt instrument to a population with highly variable support needs.

The consultation period is limited; the impact may be lasting.

With the government consultation closing on 26 June 2026, there is limited time for the full range of student voices – particularly those who struggle to engage with formal processes – to be heard. Policymakers should consider whether the evidence base currently before them is sufficient to justify reforms of this scale and potential consequence.

Concluding reflections

This report set out to understand how neurodivergent students using BiH perceive the proposed DSA reforms. What emerged from the findings was not simply concern about a single tool, but broader questions about how specialist neurodivergent support is understood, evaluated, and funded within higher education.

Students repeatedly described support that helped them remain engaged with university, manage anxiety and overwhelm, maintain independence, and navigate periods of uncertainty. Across responses, support was often experienced not simply as assistive technology, but as part of the infrastructure that enabled participation in higher education.

The findings also raise important questions about how “adequate” support should be assessed in practice. Students consistently described the value of specialist support as lying not simply in isolated features, but in integrated, neurodivergent-informed systems of support combining practical tools, emotional regulation strategies, predictability, and human support.

The findings do not argue against reform. Rather, they highlight the importance of reform that is evidence-led, responsive to the diversity of neurodivergent student experiences, and attentive to the potential long-term implications for participation, wellbeing, independence, and inclusion within higher education.

The government consultation remains open until 26 June 2026. Students, universities, and support providers all have an important role in ensuring the evidence submitted is as detailed, representative, and student-centred as possible.



Links and references

The official government consultation for these changes closes on June 26th, and can be accessed via this link:

[Click here to access the government consultation for proposed DSA changes to assistive technology funding](#)

To cite this report: Scott, M and Guyatt, H (2026). What Students Are Telling Us: Neurodivergent Student Perspectives on Proposed DSA Changes. Brain in Hand Ltd. May 2026

Further references

- [1] Academic Jobs (2026). DfE Proposes to Strip Most Assistive Software from Disabled Students' Allowance Amid Consultation
- [2] Hughes, G., Priestley, M., & Spanner, L. (2024). Stretched at both ends: Pressure on student services and the impact on academic staff at UK universities. *Education Sciences*, 15(1), 13.
- [3] Government Equalities Office (2010). Equality Act 2010: guidance. *Gov.uk*.

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