

PiXL INSIGHTS

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS TO
**improve inclusion for
learners with SEND**



PiXL INSIGHTS

“The most valuable resource that all teachers have is each other.”

ROBERT JOHN MEEHAN

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EXPLORING ENHANCED PROVISION

“I’ve always found it helpful to look at what’s happening in other parts of the sector beyond my own first discipline and phase: secondary religious education. What I have found is that there are two parts of the sector that always supply new insights and pause for thought. One of these is early years, and the other is special educational needs.” MARY MYATT



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TRANSITION BETWEEN PHASES OF EDUCATION

FIND OUT
MORE



Welcome

Welcome to our second PiXL Insights publication on improving inclusion for learners with SEND.

PiXL Insights is much more than this publication, however. Condensed in these pages are the professional insights gleaned from colleagues in schools and colleges across the PiXL network, who have been working with us over the last year on projects to build inclusive spaces, processes and practices that are better able to meet the needs of all our learners.

Meet the Team



HANNAH COSTANZO PiXL INSIGHTS STRATEGIC LEAD

In the decade-plus that I have been working at PiXL, I have been privileged to work on a wide variety of projects and strategies, from writing character education resources to managing the production of our PiXL TV series *PiXL in Action* and *PiXL in Conversation*. I am forever in awe of the work that is happening in schools, and I'm driven by a desire to champion and broadcast that practice for the benefit of all our member schools. In my current role as Head of Cross-Phase Projects, I get to lead on the development and delivery of strategies that support across our entire membership network from EYFS up to post 16. It's incredibly enriching to think about themes and ideas across the entire education journey, and it's one of the reasons that PiXL Insights remains one of my favourite projects to work on.



GARY LOBBETT MENTOR FOR PiXL INSIGHTS PROJECTS

I joined the education sector from a background in the Arts and business development. As Deputy Headteacher I was fortunate to gain a secondment to the International Learning and Research Centre and contribute to curriculum developments and school improvements nationally. I later led primary and secondary schools as Headteacher and CEO and have worked for many years supporting schools and Trusts to embed high expectations, improve the quality of teaching and learning, and develop talent and leadership at all levels. I relished the opportunity to join PiXL in 2018 and am privileged to be a member of the PiXL Insights Team, supporting schools involved in shaping and implementing such innovative PiXL Insights projects that help to improve outcomes for children and young people across the primary, secondary and post 16 sectors.

There is much about the way that the SEND system works which is challenging for school leaders, teachers, families and of course the children and young people, and much that is beyond our control. We wanted to take this opportunity now to thank those schools and colleagues who volunteered to design and run these projects with us. We have been inspired by every single person's commitment to inclusivity and championing the assets and abilities of all learners.

We are also thrilled to share insights and expertise from esteemed colleagues at The Sutton Trust and Parentkind, whose research in this area has contributed profoundly to our 'national picture' of SEND. We are grateful also to colleagues at Lexonic, Concerro, nasen and Zen Educate, and to Shaun Flores and Dr Sarah Martin-Denham, all of whom have contributed articles, insight and research to these pages. We hope these, combined with the practice shared by schools, will provide you with some useful ideas to take away, adapt and explore in your own settings.

Networking and collaboration are at the heart of how we support schools at PiXL, so our door is always open for you to share any thoughts or feedback with us. You can contact us on insights@pixl.org.uk. Happy reading!



HANNAH GRUNBERG PiXL INSIGHTS CO-ORDINATOR

In my first two years at PiXL, I have thoroughly enjoyed the variety of opportunities to collaborate with different teams to support schools and colleges. As Operations Co-ordinator across 4-18, I work closely with the team to help co-ordinate communications and projects, including PiXL Insights, whilst also providing customer care for schools. PiXL Insights embodies two central values that I share with PiXL – a strive for excellence and the power of a connected network. I am constantly inspired by the impactful work of the educators we support and the dedication they bring to their profession.



HEATHER SAGAR DESIGNER

I started working for PiXL as a part-time proof-reader. With a background in graphic design, I couldn't let anything go without at least 'tidying it up' a little first! I have now had the honour of working as a design consultant for over ten years, working on everything from company-wide branding, conference materials, cross-phase packages like PiXL Reading and, of course, PiXL Insights. My aim is to make the aesthetic of everything that comes my way, whether it's a one-page Word document or a 100-page publication, match the quality of the content written. I believe PiXL's offering is special and I want people to be able to access that in the most beautiful way possible.



TASHA ROBERTSON PROOF-READER

I have been working as a proof-reader for PiXL for six years. My background is in secondary English teaching, and I also have experience in primary and EYFS settings. I am a final set of eyes on a variety of PiXL materials, ranging from classroom provision packages and teacher guidance to conference items, network publications and company policy documents. I especially enjoy working on resources for the classroom as it allows me to put my previous experience to good use, viewing content through the lens of a teacher as well as a proof-reader. I am proud to contribute to the work of PiXL and to call myself part of the team.

What is PiXL Insights?

PiXL Insights was first developed in 2021. We wanted to find a way to support our members in closing stubborn national achievement gaps, while recognising that each setting is unique and what works for one will not necessarily work for all. **So instead of trying to create a central strategy or approach, we committed to helping our members design and implement targeted and bespoke projects that would address the specific needs of their own students.** We then published the professional insights of the teachers and leaders who ran projects in the first Insights publication on raising boys' achievement in June 2022. To date we have now published six issues of PiXL Insights across our four cohorts: **boys, more able learners, learners with SEND, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.** Plus a special edition with our friends at Parentkind on **partnering with parents for impact.**

The aim is to:

- help schools unpick the nuanced needs in their own setting
- share a wide variety of ideas and practice from across the network
- champion the profound importance of teacher professional insights
- invite all members, and readers, to reflect on how the ideas and practice could be adapted in their own settings.

WHAT ARE INSIGHTS PROJECTS?

Each project is developed and designed by the participant school, in conversation with their project mentor who supports throughout the project's duration. **PiXL Insights is not action research**, nor does it pretend to be. Projects run as part of PiXL Insights are just that: projects. They are a process through which teachers and practitioners are exploring new ideas and practice in their settings that they believe, based on their professional understanding, will bring about a positive outcome.

Projects can be:

- aimed at supporting children and young people from any age group from **EYFS to Post 16**;
- focused on **any aspect of school life**;
- run as part of a wider and/or pre-existing school strategy or be a brand-new completely independent piece of work;
- **led by any member of staff** in the setting, as long as they are well-placed and well-supported to be able to do this successfully.*

The write-ups in these pages are the teachers' insights (an underappreciated resource, in our opinion): they include their rationale, how they implemented their ideas, whether they felt the project had the intended impact, as well as their perspectives on what worked well and what they might do differently next time. **More information on how your school or setting could become involved in future PiXL Insights publications can be found on page 142.**

REFLECTING ON PROJECTS

We are proud to be able to share a wide variety of projects and ideas in these pages, and we hope that this is a publication that you can return to over time as your practice evolves and your priorities shift. The projects in this publication are by design bound up in the context of the individual schools and settings. As Dylan Wiliam so wisely put it: **'everything works somewhere, nothing works everywhere.'** So as you reflect on the contents of these pages, it's important to both keep an open mind about what might work in your setting while also knowing that not everything will.

We have tried to present the content in a way that helps you to reflect on the practice and ideas. Alongside each school's write up you will find:

- contextual data for that school, so that you can understand how similar or different it is to your own setting.
- a section at the end titled 'adapting these ideas' which poses some reflective questions based on the insights shared in each write-up.

We would urge you to resist the temptation to skip over projects just because they focus on a key stage that you do not work with: as a cross-phase organisation, we are passionate believers in the power of sharing ideas across phases of education! What is commonplace practice in one phase of education could be a complete game-changer in another.

* In the past, we have had projects run successfully by teaching assistants, classroom practitioners, middle leaders, senior leaders and Trust leaders. It is important, however, that any project has the backing and support of SLT, regardless of who is running it.

Using this publication in your context

THE NATIONAL SEND CONTEXT

SEND is incredibly complex, and there is much about the system that frustrates school leaders, teachers, and families. All of us working within the education sector, particularly those focusing on inclusion, will be familiar with the challenge of working within an imperfect system.

The following few double pages will present you with statistics and information to help build a picture of SEND in UK schools. We have focused our attention on information that we think will be helpful to school leaders, SENDCos, and teachers as they strive to meet the needs of children in their contexts. In almost all cases, individual schools will have access to much richer and more nuanced data, but we hope our summaries provide a helpful comparison.

We understand and appreciate that much of the challenge – regional differences, long waiting lists, et cetera – are beyond the remit of individual schools to fix. We hope that the projects shared in this publication demonstrate that we can all still have an incredibly positive impact on the success experienced by children and young people, even from within an imperfect system.

It is worth considering the questions below in order to get the most out of the publication as a whole.

1

What areas of school life currently pose the biggest challenge for children and young people with SEND in your setting? How do you know this?

What (or where) are the key barriers to inclusion in your school? What work is already underway to try to overcome these barriers? Who is involved in that work?

2

What data from the national picture information (pages 10 – 17) stands out to you? How do the national trends compare to your own setting?

Does any of the data suggest a possible avenue to explore that you have not considered before?

3

Who in school might find this publication useful beyond the SENDCo? Are there particular sections that might be more relevant to certain staff?

How could the reading of this publication contribute to ongoing conversations around SEND and inclusion in your setting?

4

Where is the best inclusive practice happening in your setting?

What are the current mechanisms for sharing good practice across your school, and how might the ideas in this publication supplement these?

5

How can you create regular moments throughout the year to return to the questions and ideas raised in this publication?

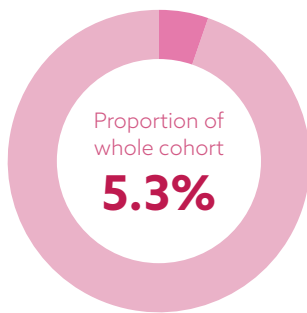
Different ideas will resonate at different times of year and with different teams: what can you anticipate?

The national picture

The SEND Cohort

In 2025, more than 1.7 million pupils in England have been identified as having special educational needs.¹ Within this group there are children identified as requiring SEN support within their setting and those with an Educational, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) whose needs are more complex or severe and require additional support in coordination with the local authority.*

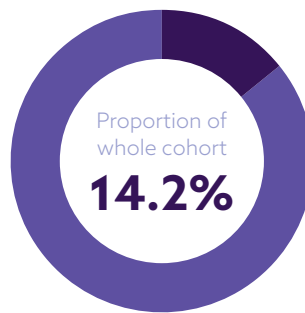
PUPILS WITH EHCPs



Total number:
482,640

Change from 2024:
11%↑

PUPILS IDENTIFIED AS NEEDING SEN SUPPORT²



Total number:
1,284,284

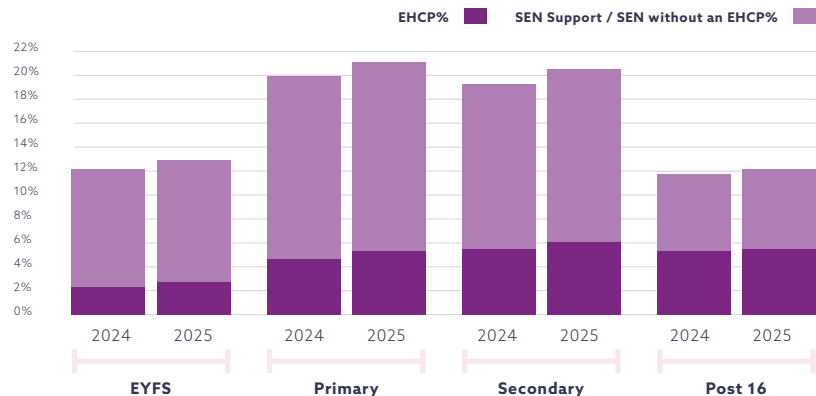
Change from 2024:
3.7%↑

The most common type of need for students with an EHCP is **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**.

The most common type of need for pupils receiving SEN support is **speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)**.

Distribution across school phases³

The proportion of pupils with SEND has risen across the phases of education in England in 2025. This chart compares the changes from 2023/24 to 2024/25 in the percentage of children with an EHCP or receiving SEND support without an EHCP across all key stages.



IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

70,200 pupils are identified as having some form of special educational need, representing **19.8%** of the school population.⁴

Pupils with a statement of SEN***

Total Number: **29,500** Proportion of whole cohort: **8.3%**

Pupils with SEN without a statement

Total Number: **40,700** Proportion of whole cohort: **11.5%**

IN WALES

Approximately **43,880** pupils with ALN (Additional Learning Needs) or SEN**** in maintained schools, representing **9.5%** of all pupils.⁵

Of those identified with ALN/SEN,

73.2% of those have individual development plans (IDPs) as of January 2025. This has increased from **40.9%** of all students with ALN/SEN in January 2024.⁶

* For the extent of this article, when we refer to children and young people with SEND we are referring to this combined group unless we make it clear that we are referring to those with an EHCP (in England) or a statement (Northern Ireland) or individual development plan (IDP - in Wales).

** It is worth noting that in Northern Ireland, some conditions such as ASD and ADHD are counted as medical needs not educational needs, and so do not count in overall SEN figures unless the individual pupil is also identified as needing educational support.

*** Stage 3 of the SEN Code of Practice in Northern Ireland, roughly equivalent to an EHCP in England. Since the changes brought into Northern Ireland in 2019, when the SEN Code of Practice moved from a 5- to a 3-stage approach, there has been a gradual increase in the number of pupils with a statement and a reduction in the number of students identified as having SEND without having a statement.

**** The Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales came into force on 1st September 2021, and since then the move from the old SEN system to the new ALN system is still being implemented. Because of changes in how the system works, we should be careful about making too many comparisons with previous years.

Potential reasons for the rise in SEND numbers

In England, The Sutton Trust⁷ have identified a number of potential reasons for this rise in SEND numbers, including:

Better diagnostic tools	Issues with 'construct validity' whereby our definitions of SEND are not robust enough – which can mean inaccurate diagnoses leading to over- or under identification of SEND*	Improved material care and medical care for babies born prematurely	Extension of SEND support to the age of 25 which may have encouraged EHCP applications due to their increased timeframes for support.
Increased awareness			

The relationship between gender and identified SEND

Identified SEN continues to be **more prevalent in boys than girls.**

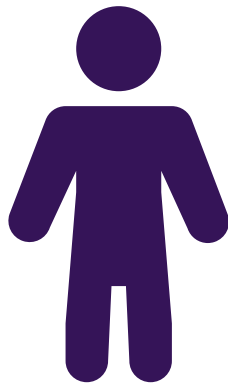
In England:⁸

71.4%

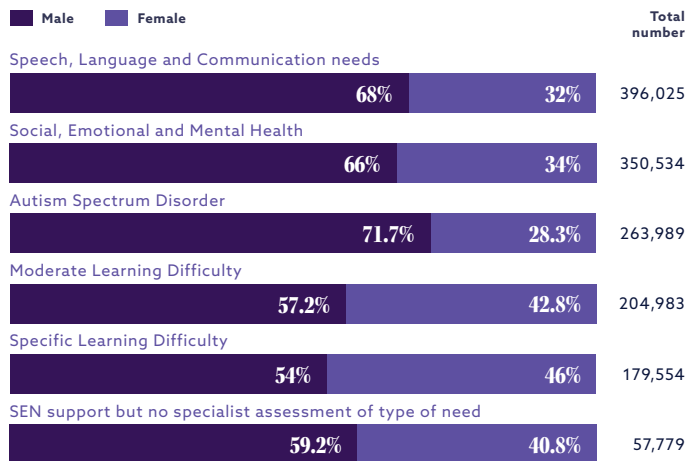
of all pupils with an EHCP are male

61.2%

of pupils receiving SEND support are male



The graphics below show the proportion of male and female pupils identified with the six most common needs.



The disparity could in part be down to different presentations of some conditions in boys and girls. While there are still significant disparities, the proportion of students identified as having SEND who are male has been decreasing in recent years (as this graphic shows). Given the rising numbers of students being identified with SEND overall, this is likely as a result of more girls being identified as having SEND than in previous years, potentially as a result of greater awareness for variance in presentations across the genders.⁹

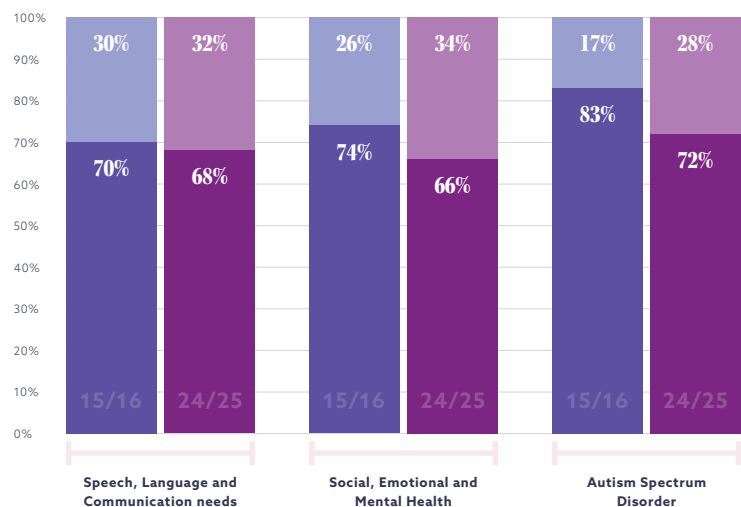
2015/2016



2024/2025



A comparison of identified SEND need and gender over time



* This can lead to children and young people being placed on the SEND register when they should not be, and vice versa.

The relationship between SEND and social disadvantage

Children from lower income backgrounds (most commonly measured by Free School Meals eligibility, 'FSM') tend to be over-represented in the SEND cohort. However, as The Sutton Trust point out in their 2025 report, this overall relationship can obscure complexity in which multiple factors can come into play. Below are some of the factors that they identify.¹⁰

The impact of low income will vary depending on the type of SEND we are considering.

In some cases, the impact of poverty can lead children to be categorised as SEND (e.g. if they are 'acting out' due to challenging home lives, they could be recorded as needing SEMH support).

Children with SEND are more likely to move into poverty due to parents having to reduce work commitments to support their child, or because of costs associated with raising a child with SEND.

The prevalence of genetic inheritance in certain types of SEND can be a factor in some cases.

Poor maternal health, including lower quality pre-natal care, can contribute to some types of SEND.

Parental separation is more likely for parents of children with SEND, leading to more children with SEND living in single parent households.

TYPES OF NEED

“Pupils eligible for FSM are most over-represented in SEMH, MLD and SLD* possibly due to underlying social or safeguarding factors being misinterpreted as SEND needs – labels that can sometimes be applied without formal assessment.”¹¹

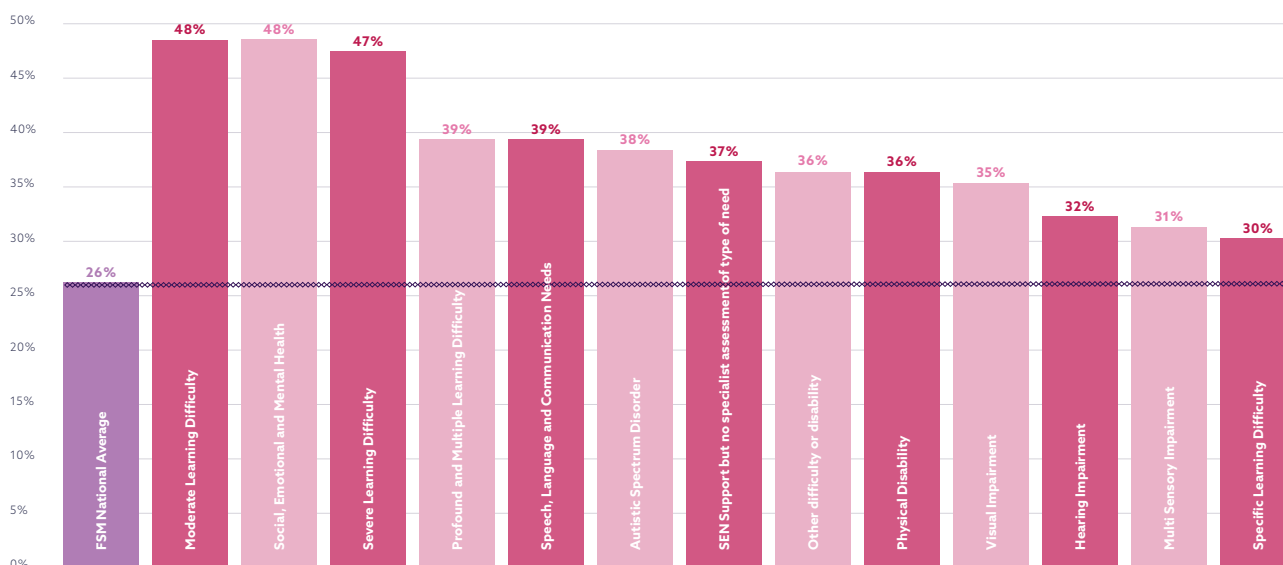
FREE SCHOOL MEALS

We should be aware as we consider this intersection that, as well as an increasing number of children being identified as having SEND, the percentage of children eligible for Free School Meals has almost doubled since 2015/2016.¹²

2015/2016	2024/2025	Difference	↑
14%	26%	12%	

The graph below, based on data from The Sutton Trust, demonstrates the over-representation of FSM-eligible children in different SEND categories.

FSM proportion in each type of SEND for school year 24/25 - primary need only¹³



* MLD – Moderate Learning Difficulty; SLD – Severe Learning Difficulty.

According to Parentkind's National Parent Survey, parents of a child with SEND are far more likely to be struggling with their finances than parents of a child without SEND (45% versus 29%).¹⁴

Parents of a child with SEND are also far more likely to have:¹⁵

- skipped meals
- used a food bank
- taken on an extra job or extra hours
- rationed the heating
- taken out a loan or debt



Happiness and connectedness at school

According to a survey conducted by the Children's Commissioner, children with SEND reported higher levels of loneliness and poorer mental health in school.¹⁶

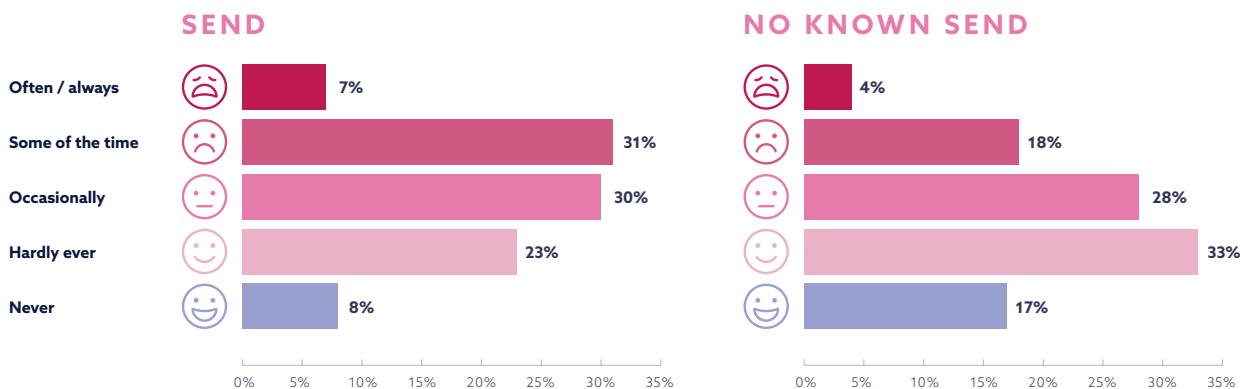
Only 31% of children with SEND said they 'never' or 'hardly ever' felt lonely compared to 51% of children without SEND (see graph below).

59% of young people with SEND (aged 8 - 17) said that not knowing how to look after their mental health is something that affects them (compared to 38% of their peers with no known SEND).

Young people with SEND were more likely to state that they didn't have support in school or when learning from home to help them do their best (66% said this affected them, compared to 48% of their peers with no known SEND).

55% of children said that "not having someone to talk to when I feel worried" is something that affects them (compared to 38% of their peers with no known SEND).

How often do you feel lonely?¹⁷



These findings are echoed by parents in Parentkind's National Parent Survey.¹⁸

Almost half (49%) of parents with a child with SEND reported that they feel lonely every week, compared to 29% of parents of a child without SEND.

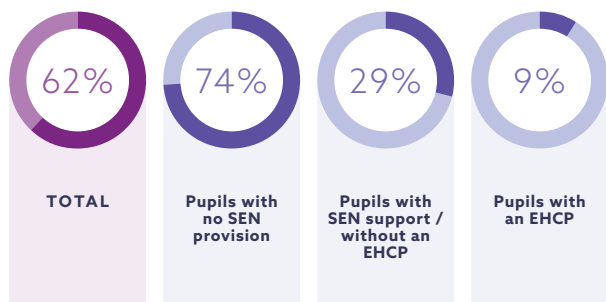
According to parents, children with SEND are twice as likely to have reported being bullied in the last year (one in three children, compared to one in six for those with no known SEND).

Outcomes for children and young people with SEND

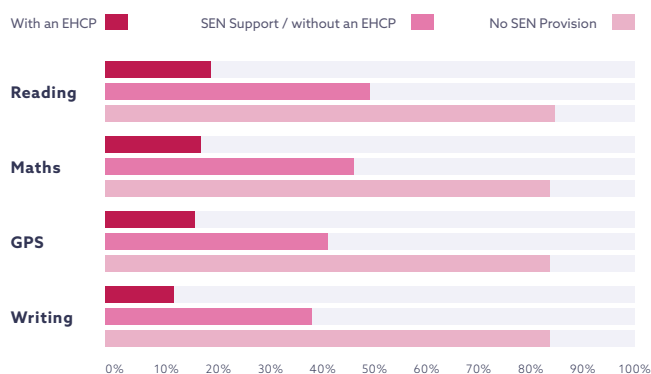
Because there is so much variety in the type and severity of need across the SEND cohort, it can be difficult – and not always helpful – to compare academic outcomes between students with SEND and their peers. This section does include national outcomes data for KS2 and KS4, but individual schools will have much more useful and nuanced data about how students with different needs are performing in comparison to their peers.

KEY STAGE 2 OUTCOMES¹⁹

Percentage of students achieving the Expected Standard in Reading, Writing and Maths (Combined)



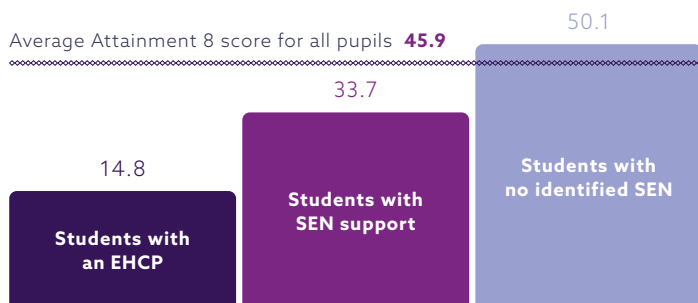
Percentage of pupils achieving the Expected Standard in individual subjects



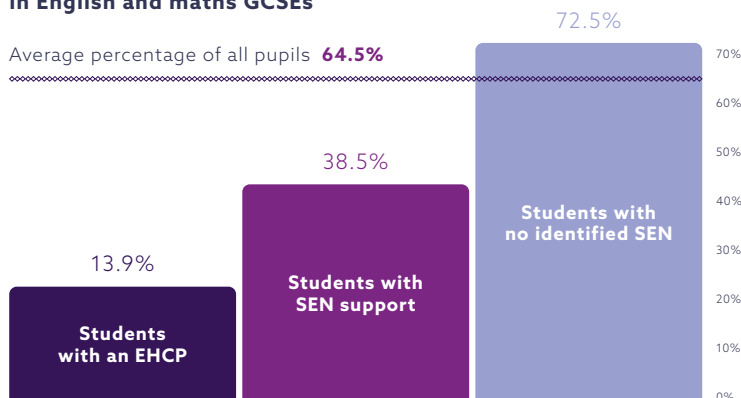
KEY STAGE 4 OUTCOMES²⁰

These figures are for England, but the trend is very similar in Northern Ireland and Wales.

Attainment 8 at Key Stage 4*



Percentage of pupils achieving grades 4 or above in English and maths GCSEs



Only 1 in 5 of children transitioning into secondary school with an EHCP will have met the expected standard in reading –

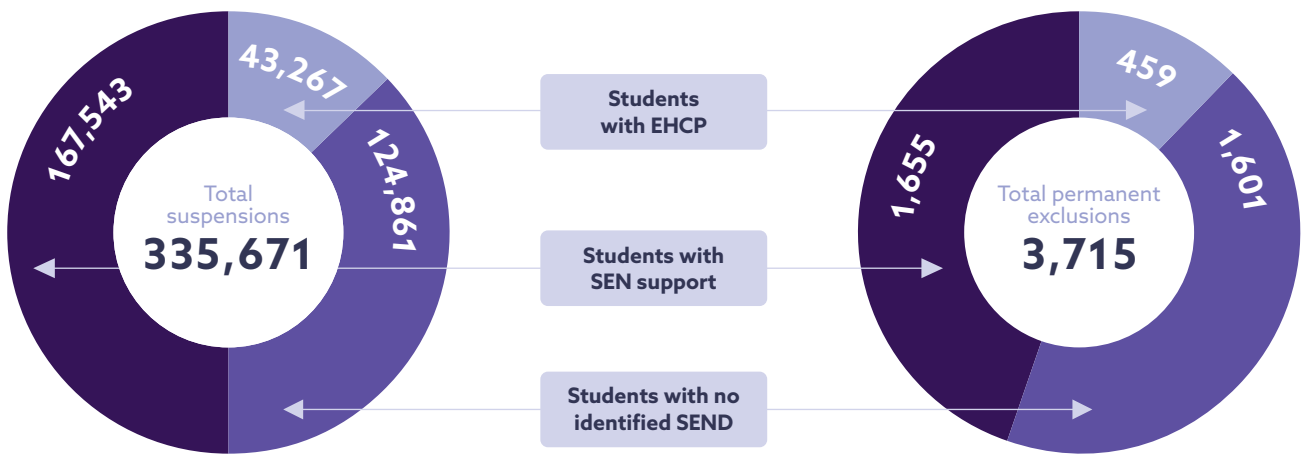
something which will continue to have a profound impact on their learning and progress throughout secondary school.



* The average student performance across 8 key GCSE subjects, including double-weighted English and maths, calculated as a points score.

Suspensions and permanent exclusions

In England in autumn term 2024/25, the suspension rates and permanent exclusion rates for students with SEND are over double the average rates.²¹



Average suspension rate: **4%**

Suspension rate for students with EHCP: **10.3%**

Suspension rate for students on SEN support: **11.1%**

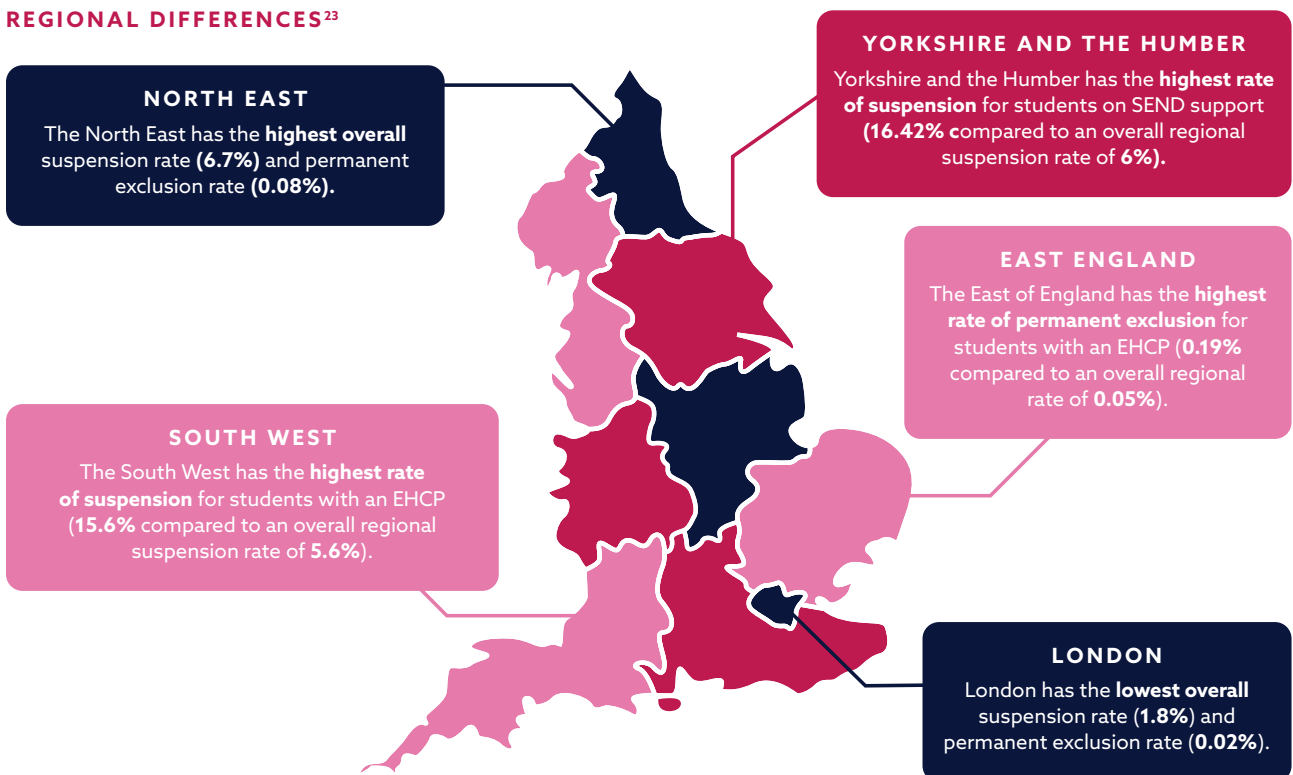
Average permanent exclusion rate: **0.04%**

Permanent exclusion rate for students with EHCP: **0.11%**

Permanent exclusion rate for students on SEN support: **0.14%**

In Northern Ireland in 2023/24, **38.4% of all students who were suspended had SEN**. This is an over-representation given that students with SEN make up only approximately 19% of the entire cohort.²²

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES²³



Attendance

2024/25 average attendance rate in England²⁴

Those with no known SEN

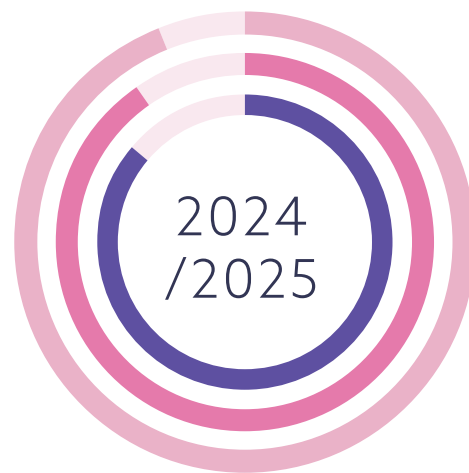
94%

Those on SEN support

89.4%

Those with EHCPs

86.3%



Students with an EHCP were over twice as likely to be persistently absent from school than their peers with no known SEN (36.9% compared to 16.5%).

Attendance rates in Northern Ireland²⁵

Students with a statement	87.3%
Students with SEN (no statement)	88.9%
Students with no identified SEN	92.7%
Average attendance	91.7%

In Northern Ireland, pupils with a SEN statement are almost twice as likely to have unauthorised absences from school than their peer with no identified SEN: **7.5% days with unauthorised absence in comparison to 3.5%.**

Attendance rates in Wales²⁶

In 2024/25, **17.7%** of half-day sessions were missed by pupils with a SEN/ALN provision compared to **10.1%** of sessions missed by their peers with no SEN/ALN provision.

47% of secondary-school aged pupils with a SEN/ALN provision were persistently absent in 2024/25, compared to **31.5%** without a SEN/ALN provision.

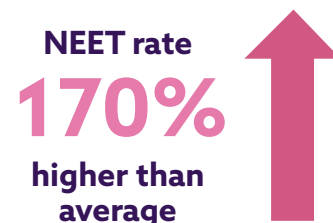
Young People not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

According to a recent report from Impetus²⁷, young people identified with SEND are **80% more likely** to be NEET compared to the average.

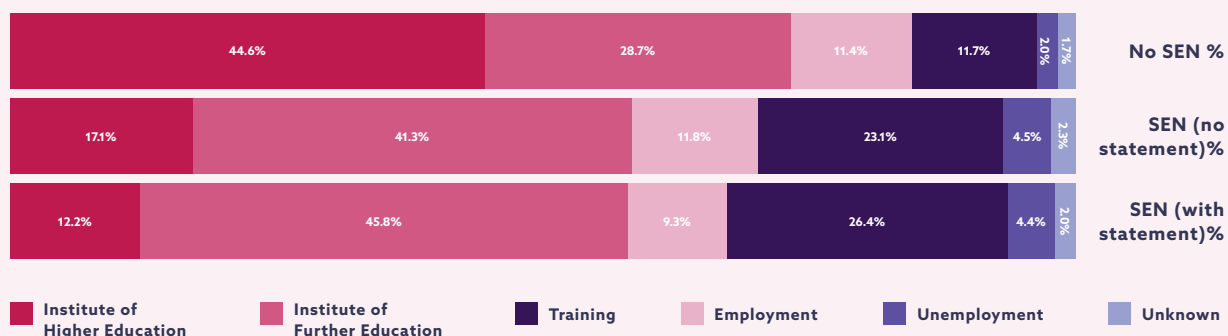
The report identifies a 'triple jeopardy' for young people who are:

- from low socio-economic backgrounds
- have low qualifications
- have SEND.

These young people are three times more likely to be NEET, with a NEET rate that is 170% higher than the average.



The chart below compares the 2023/24 destination data for students with SEND in Northern Ireland with that of their peers.²⁸



While we hope that this data and information provides you with useful insight, and some potential lines of inquiry to explore in your own setting, we must always be mindful of the limitations of labels such as SEND.

“Having a label increases the awareness amongst educational professionals that a child is vulnerable in some way. But the label alone actually tells us very little. What do we actually know about a child who is defined as ‘SEND’, ‘Pupil Premium’ or ‘LAC’? It is critically important to understand pupil need.”²⁹ MARC ROWLAND

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INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM PRACTICE







WOLLASTON PRIMARY SCHOOL
AND THE ABBEY PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: EYFS

What works? Supporting speech, language and communication in the EYFS

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this project was to implement and evaluate strategies designed to support the development of speech and vocabulary among children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) identified with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Specifically, the project sought to explore whether structured, research-informed approaches could enhance expressive language and peer interaction within authentic classroom environments. In addition, by conducting the project across two contrasting school settings, we aimed to examine whether the impact of these strategies was consistent across contexts or context-specific in nature. The project was delivered collaboratively by EYFS teachers and support staff at Wollaston Primary School and The Abbey Primary School, under the strategic oversight of the School Improvement Lead. A particular focus was placed on eight children – four from each school – who began the academic year with notably low levels of communication and language development.

WHY THIS MATTERS

There's a strong body of evidence linking early language development to long-term academic and social outcomes.

The PiXL Oracy guide states:

“A pupil’s oracy skills will impact their life going forward, beyond their time in education.”¹

The team drew on:

- the ShREC model (based on EEF guidance)²
- practical elements from the PiXL Oracy package,
- insights from Georgina Durrant’s *SEND Strategies for the Primary Years*.³

Together, these provided a toolkit that could be adapted to suit real classrooms.

WHAT DID WE DO?

A key aim of this project was to identify and implement a set of core strategies, grounded in existing research, that could positively influence the development of spoken language and vocabulary in EYFS settings. The project was informed by an inclusive pedagogical approach – working from the assumption that strategies effective for children with additional needs can also benefit the wider cohort.

Alongside this universal focus, a specific strand of the project examined the impact of these approaches on a small group of children, particularly those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The emphasis within this specific group was on developing expressive language and social communication.

To support this work, we used the identification criteria outlined in Georgina Durrant's *SEND Strategies for the Primary Years* as a framework for recognising and responding to individual needs. Children were assessed against these criteria initially and then again at the end of the project.

The focus of the project centred on both expressive and receptive language development, reflecting the specific needs identified in the target group of children upon entry into Reception. The eight children selected for focused support demonstrated limited verbal output, often preferring to observe rather than participate in interactions. Their communication was typically restricted to short or single-word responses, with minimal sentence construction. Additionally, several children showed difficulty in processing and responding to verbal instructions, and instances of echolalia were observed in one child.

Please see below for examples of statements from Durrant's *SEND Strategies for the Primary Years* which we used to identify individual children's needs.

EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Statements – children MAY:	Statements – children MAY:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not talk very much• Have a limited vocabulary• Misunderstand instructions• Use words in the wrong context• Be selective of whom they talk to and when• Give short answers• Use short words• Struggle to put words into a sentence• Miss 'ed' or 'd' at the ends of words, such as 'd' at the end of danced.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find making and keeping friends difficult• Appear not to want to communicate with others• Misunderstand gestures and body language• Struggle to take turns (or follow social rules)• Have difficulties learning, remembering and using names• Find identifying, understanding and expressing emotions challenging• Daydream• Fall out with friends due to misunderstanding social situations• Have concentration difficulties.

The PiXL Communication and Language package⁴, developed in collaboration with Jean Gross CBE, draws on current research evidence, highlighting three key strategies shown to support the development of language and communication:

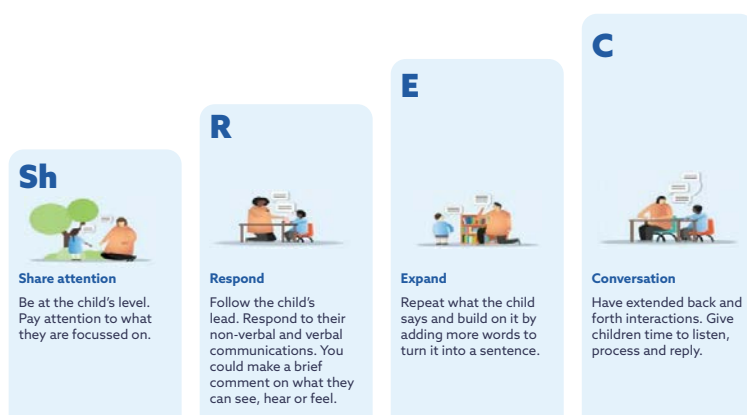
- Sustained back-and-forth interactions between adults and children.
- Regular shared book experiences.
- The intentional use of sophisticated and new vocabulary, repeated meaningfully across varied contexts.

With these evidence-based principles as a foundation, the project team explored how such strategies could be translated into everyday classroom practice. The intention was to embed these approaches into the fabric of daily provision in a way that supported all learners – not solely those within the identified focus group – thereby fostering a language-rich environment across the entire EYFS setting.

“The project was informed by an inclusive pedagogical approach – working from the assumption that strategies effective for children with additional needs can also benefit the wider cohort.”

To support the children we chose to implement the following:

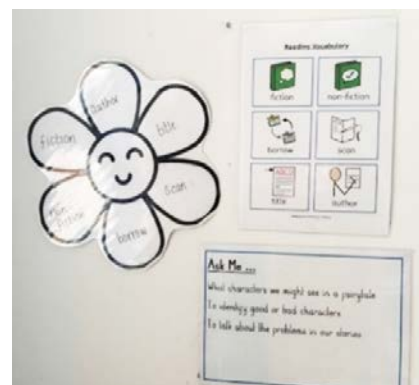
- **Use of ShREC model training** for all staff, focusing on showing, hearing, responding, expanding, and connecting language.
- **Use of visual aids and dual coding**, including vocabulary prompts, “my turn/ your turn” visuals, and Widget symbols.
- **Implementation of three familiar storybooks** over time to develop vocabulary through repetition.
- **Role play and shared storytelling**, with adults modelling language naturally in play contexts.
- **Modelling** including providing conversation starters such as ‘I can see...’ and ‘I’ve just noticed...’ used to invite talk.
- **A scaffolded “I do – we do – you do”** model to build independence in speaking.



To support consistent language use, each learning area displayed key vocabulary and guiding questions for adults.

This helped ensure that staff focused on specific language during interactions and that children were exposed to repeated, meaningful vocabulary. The aim was to build on what children already knew and encourage them to use language to explain their thinking and actions. These supports evolved into visual tools to make language learning more visible and accessible across the setting, such as:

- **vocab flowers**
- **'Ask me' signs**
- **Widget symbols**



Throughout the project, adults consistently modelled spoken language using structured sentence stems such as **“I can see...”** and **“I’ve just noticed...”**. These stems served as entry points for initiating rich, responsive dialogue with children. Staff developed their skill of engaging in purposeful yet natural conversations, seamlessly joining in and withdrawing from conversations as needed.

The identified strategies were systematically integrated into daily classroom routines. They were modelled during whole-class sessions, embedded in small group activities, and deliberately incorporated into high-quality role play opportunities. Visual prompts were displayed consistently throughout the learning environment, serving as reference points for both staff and children.

The focus children engaged in planned activities and were given structured opportunities to practise the targeted strategies throughout the week. Importantly, this approach was implemented as part of universal classroom provision rather than through isolated intervention. Only one child within the focus group received an individualised intervention programme (Ready, Steady School!) during the course of the project.

IMPACT

Through observation, staff noticed that children who had previously only watched others and showed minimal engagement began joining in with group activities and participating more regularly. Those who initially used only single-word utterances like **“toilet”** progressed to full sentences such as **“I need the toilet please”**.

Other children, who had started the year communicating through pointing or simply repeating adult speech, began using language more independently – often speaking in four- to six-word sentences to organise their play.

Staff noted a clear shift from isolated verb/noun use to fuller sentence structures and more confident interaction with both adults and peers. Overall, children responded positively to the consistent routines established through this approach, developing independence much earlier than in previous cohorts where this strategy wasn't in place.

Children also adapted quickly to routines and developed independence earlier than in previous years, when this language-rich approach had not been used.

When measured against the assessment criteria used at the start of the project, the outcomes indicated a clear and positive impact on both expressive language development and social communication.

Although none of the identified children met the Early Learning Goal (ELG) for speaking in one of the participating schools, all demonstrated substantial progress. The majority of these children began the academic year working within the Birth to 3 developmental band and concluded the year operating securely within the upper range of the 3–4-year-old band. Some children made greater progress and reached the Early Learning Goal outcome for Reception. The key point of note is that all the children in the focus group made significant progress from their starting point. These outcomes highlight that meaningful gains in communication skills were achieved over the project period.

Although progress was not immediate, observable improvements emerged over time. By the end of the academic year, children who had started with minimal verbal interaction were independently producing short, structured sentences. Their confidence in communicating increased notably, with greater engagement in peer interactions and more frequent initiation of conversation. The eight target children demonstrated measurable progress in both expressive language and social communication.

Notably, the strategies implemented also had a wider impact across the cohort. In one school, **81%** of children achieved the Early Learning Goal (ELG) for speaking; in the other, the figure was **90%**. These outcomes indicate that the strategies were effective not only for those with identified language needs but also for the broader group, contributing to overall development within the prime area of speaking.

The consistency of these results across two distinct school contexts suggests that the approaches are neither context-dependent nor limited to specific learner profiles. The scale and breadth of the impact exceed initial expectations and provide strong evidence of the strategies' potential value across Early Years settings.

As one teaching assistant put it:

“Adults in the environment are the greatest and most valuable resources. When we play alongside children, we script, guide and extend their language.”

KEY LESSONS

Some of the most effective strategies were also the simplest:

- **Training is vital.** Understanding ShREC is one thing; the real impact comes when adults know how to act on the ShREC model and do so with consistency.
- **Modelling** talk and routines is key.
- **Consistency is powerful.** Familiar routines, repeated stories, and visual supports had a big impact.
- **Classroom culture matters.** We didn't isolate children with SLCN – we made the whole space more language-rich.
- **Inclusive practice benefits everyone.** These approaches supported the wider cohort without compromising their learning.



NEXT STEPS

Given the positive outcomes, the Trust plans to build on this approach. The next step will be to create and roll out training for all EYFS staff across schools. This training will focus on practical, easy-to-use strategies that staff can apply in the Early Years environment to support children's language development consistently and effectively.

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EYFS & DEPUTY HEAD
WOLLASTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

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EYFS TEACHER
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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT LEAD
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ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Alison, Gemma and Simon have described how language has been made visible using prompts such as vocab flowers, 'Ask me' signs, and Widget symbols to support independence and reinforce spoken language. Are there opportunities to make key vocabulary and question prompts more visible in your environment for both staff and children?
- The project has shown that strategies designed for SLCN learners enhanced outcomes for the whole cohort. Could there be similar benefits in your setting for building an environment where communication-friendly practice benefits all children, not only those identified with specific additional needs, to create a culture of language-rich inclusion?
- Staff training in ShREC and vocabulary modelling avoided a reliance on specialist staff and ensured consistency in implementation by all adults. Does your staff training programme equip every adult, for example, including Teaching Assistants and lunchtime staff, to model and extend talk?
- At Wollaston and The Abbey, two contrasting schools saw consistent impact, showing these strategies are adaptable and scalable. What systems could you use to share effective oracy practice across classes, phases in your setting, or across schools in your Trust?

WOLLASTON PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
Northamptonshire

251

NUMBER ON ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Reception-Year 6



BOYS
53%



PP
21%



SEND
21%

THE ABBEY PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
Northamptonshire

384

NUMBER ON ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Reception-Year 6



BOYS
48%



PP
26%



SEND
18%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Both schools are part of INMAT in Northamptonshire.



“The eight target children demonstrated measurable progress in both expressive language and social communication.”



BY LEXONIC

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS3-KS5

Supporting older learners to build strong foundations in reading

In every classroom, the ability to read underpins access to learning, shaping how learners engage with every subject: decoding a maths problem, following instructions in science, or interpreting a question in history all depend on literacy skills. For learners who struggle with reading, each lesson can quickly become a significant challenge. Some learners experience additional barriers due to SEND, such as dyslexia or auditory processing difficulties, while others may have missed crucial early phonics instruction for a variety of reasons. Regardless of the cause, the impact is profound, often manifesting as frustration, reduced confidence, and barriers to academic progress. At Lexonic, we firmly believe that no one should be limited because they can't read, and this mission drives every aspect of our work to ensure that every learner secures the foundations of reading, whatever their starting point.

INTENT

Every learner deserves the opportunity to develop strong reading foundations, but achieving this requires teaching that is responsive to individual needs. For learners with SEND, this means acknowledging the additional challenges they face and providing instruction that is tailored, patient, and empathetic, ensuring they receive the precise support required to develop foundational skills. For learners without SEND, it involves identifying gaps that may have arisen from missed opportunities and offering structured, systematic support to enable them to catch up with their peers. Older learners in particular require instruction that is not only effective but also age appropriate. Expecting a teenager to engage with materials designed for much younger children is rarely motivating and can damage self-esteem; instead, interventions must respect learners' maturity while providing explicit teaching to secure the fundamental building blocks of reading.

IMPLEMENTATION

When assessment data highlights gaps in phonics or decoding, learners may begin with Lexonic Leap, a programme that combines diagnostic assessment with targeted instruction. Teachers use the diagnostic element to pinpoint the exact areas where a learner is struggling, whether this relates to phoneme–grapheme correspondence, blending, or segmenting, and then deliver activities designed to address these areas with precision, ensuring that every session is purposeful and focused.

Lexonic Leap is delivered face to face by trained teachers, an approach that is central to its effectiveness. The human element allows teachers to model strategies, offer immediate feedback, and support learners actively as they practise, which is particularly beneficial for learners with SEND who often require reassurance, clear explanation, and the opportunity to ask questions in real time. Teachers can adapt pace, provide additional scaffolding, or introduce repeated practice where necessary, creating a learning environment where learners feel supported and understood. Sessions are structured to balance challenge with achievable success, enabling learners to progress through small, manageable steps and practise until skills become automatic. This structured reinforcement ensures that even those who have struggled repeatedly with reading can experience success, an outcome that is often transformative for learners with SEND, as it builds confidence and restores trust in their ability to learn.

Teaching is always age appropriate, ensuring that phonics is framed as a practical and empowering skill rather than a remedial task. By presenting phonics as a gateway to the wider curriculum, learners see the immediate value of their work, which helps to maintain motivation and reduces the potential for embarrassment or disengagement.

WHY PHONICS MATTERS FOR OLDER LEARNERS

Although phonics is often associated with early childhood education, older learners who have missed or misunderstood key aspects of phonics instruction require explicit, systematic teaching to develop decoding skills. Without these skills, reading fluency cannot develop, and comprehension remains limited, particularly for learners with SEND, for whom decoding difficulties are frequently at the root of broader literacy challenges.

Research from the Science of Reading emphasises the importance of systematic phonics teaching for accurate word recognition.¹ Tim Rasinski has highlighted that fluent reading depends on both accuracy and automaticity², while Snowling and Hulme (2010) show that explicit literacy instruction benefits struggling readers at all ages.³ For learners with SEND, these findings reinforce the need for targeted support: addressing decoding directly enables fluency and confidence, laying the foundation for real progress.

AGE-APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION

A significant challenge in teaching phonics to older learners is ensuring that the instruction feels appropriate and engaging. Asking a teenager to revisit materials designed for Reception or Key Stage 1 rarely motivates and may reinforce negative experiences of reading. Lexonic Leap addresses this by delivering phonics instruction that is respectful, relevant, and motivating. Core skills, such as recognising sounds, blending, and segmenting, are taught using resources and examples that align with the learner's age and stage, while teacher-led delivery allows for sensitive adaptation, including the use of subject-specific vocabulary and connections to the learner's broader academic needs. This approach ensures that learners feel valued rather than diminished, maintaining engagement and reinforcing the purpose of their learning.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF LEARNERS WITH SEND

Learners with SEND often require more than adapted resources; they benefit from repetition, clarity, and multisensory input. Lexonic Leap incorporates opportunities to see, hear, and say sounds, enabling learners to secure knowledge through multiple pathways. Additional scaffolding, overlearning, and careful pacing ensure that skills are retained, while teachers are trained to recognise when these strategies are necessary and to adjust instruction to suit the learner's individual profile.

For example, a learner with dyslexia may require explicit practice with more complex sound–spelling patterns, while a learner with auditory processing difficulties may rely on visual prompts alongside spoken language. Learners with working memory challenges may need shorter, more frequent sessions to consolidate learning effectively. The teacher-led model allows these adaptations to occur seamlessly, ensuring every learner receives the support required to succeed.

“Phonics and decoding practice are not solely for young children; they are essential for older learners with gaps in reading. For learners with SEND, targeted phonics teaching can transform struggle into progress.”

IMPACT

Structured phonics intervention for older learners has wide-reaching benefits. Schools consistently report improvements not only in reading accuracy and fluency but also in learner confidence and engagement. Learners who previously avoided reading begin to participate actively, ask questions, and take pride in their progress. For learners with SEND, the impact can be transformative, as reading difficulties often affect self-esteem across subjects and lead to disengagement. Experiencing success in reading builds confidence and fosters resilience, positively influencing attitudes to learning in other areas. Academic benefits are equally significant: secure decoding enables learners to access subject content more effectively, improving comprehension and performance across the curriculum. In many cases, gains in reading also translate into improved examination outcomes, broadening opportunities beyond school.

CONCLUSION

Phonics and decoding practice are not solely for young children; they are essential for older learners with gaps in reading. For learners with SEND, targeted phonics teaching can transform struggle into progress, while for learners who have fallen behind for other reasons, explicit, age-appropriate instruction helps close gaps and rebuild confidence. At Lexonic, we remain committed to our mission that no one should be limited because they can't read. By combining diagnostic assessment, teacher-led delivery, and empathetic support, schools can ensure learners secure the reading foundations they need to thrive. Phonics instruction delivered respectfully and appropriately does more than improve reading accuracy; it restores dignity, builds resilience, and empowers learners to see themselves differently. With the right support, older learners can overcome barriers, read fluently and confidently, and gain the tools they need to shape their future, opening doors to wider learning and life opportunities.

Kate Jones

EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT
LEXONIC

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ABOUT LEXONIC

At Lexonic, we are dedicated to transforming literacy education by equipping schools and teachers with powerful, evidence-based solutions. Our mission is to give educators an edge in boosting student outcomes by providing practical, research-driven programmes that drive meaningful change. We'll go above and beyond to ensure that your students develop the skills they need to succeed. We're education-obsessed—putting in the effort to understand the needs of every school we work with so that we can tailor our approach to achieve the best results. We're in this together, committed to making literacy improvement a reality for every student, no matter where they start. Since our founding, we've earned the trust of educators worldwide by focusing on impactful outcomes and delivering on our promises.



Lexonic



“Experiencing success in reading builds confidence and fosters resilience, positively influencing attitudes to learning in other areas.”



KETTERING PARK INFANT ACADEMY

TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEARS 1&2

Strategies to support students with SEND in the mainstream classroom

INTENT

At Kettering Park Infant Academy, as part of our commitment to inclusive education, our school has undertaken a focused project to enhance the support provided to SEND pupils and those pupils working below age-related expectations within the mainstream classroom. With the ever-increasing SEND need (there has been a 140% increase in children with EHC plans since 2015¹) within all schools, and the strain of demand on outside agencies, our goal has been to ensure that all children can access learning in a way that meets their individual needs, promotes engagement, and fosters independence.

IMPLEMENTATION

To achieve this ambition, the Senior Leadership Team met to look at priorities, and as in all schools, we had a discussion around SEND. It was decided that we should take matters into our own hands and create a bespoke offer for our pupils. To achieve this, we implemented several strategies to support our teachers in meeting the growing needs within the classroom:

- 1. Key pupils identified by the SENCo to ensure the correct pupils were being targeted.**
- 2. Teacher Support Guide:** Each teacher has received a school-created guide containing a range of practical strategies and ideas for supporting pupils with additional needs. The guide includes the EEF guidance around supporting SEND² but then goes further by including specific approaches for the four areas of SEND: Communication and Interaction, Cognition and Learning, Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH), and Sensory and/or Physical Needs.
- 3. Individual Workstations:** Dedicated workstations have been set up for identified pupils within each classroom. These spaces are equipped with:
 - Sensory equipment tailored to the needs of individual pupils
 - Visual timetables and task boards to promote structure and routine
 - Personalised materials to reduce distraction and increase focus
- 4. Visual Support Tools:** Visual timetables and now-and-next boards are consistently used across classrooms to provide predictability and reduce anxiety. These tools are tailored to individual pupils where needed.
- 5. Tray Task Development:** Teachers were given dedicated time, with support from the SENCo, to create a bank of age-appropriate tray tasks for children working below curriculum expectations. These tasks are designed to:
 - Promote independence
 - Reinforce key skills through repetition and hands-on activities
 - Be easily accessible and manageable for pupils who require adapted learning materials

The SENCo and SLT complete regular learning walks to see the approaches in action and to support the staff with any tweaks necessary. As a leadership team, we did have to reinforce this idea with staff to ensure that it became a consistent practice.

IMPACT

To measure the impact of this project we looked at soft data from our monitoring and lesson visits, and hard data from a tracking through 'Assessment for All'³ and PiXL. The tangible success, watching children's confidence and independence grow, was a joy. A Year 1 pupil with sensory and communication and language needs, started the year not able to access the curriculum, sit with his peers on the carpet, or remain regulated and engaged throughout a lesson. The teacher created a wonderful workstation for him, with access to sensory resources, a visual timetable and tailor-made tray tasks. Over the course of the next few months, he began to join his peers on the carpet and to access adapted tasks. In the new year, the teacher had the confidence to remove the workstation and he was fully integrated within the class with the rest of his peers. This approach is now integrated within the school and each class in September will have their workstations set up ready for any pupils who may require them.

Over the course of the project, we have seen:

- Increased pupil engagement and participation in lessons
- Greater independence observed during structured task time
- Positive feedback from staff regarding the practicality and effectiveness of the teacher support guide
- Enhanced classroom environments that are more inclusive and responsive to individual needs.

“The tangible success, watching children’s confidence and independence grow, was a joy.”

NEXT STEPS

- Continue to review and expand the tray task bank, incorporating feedback from staff and monitoring pupil progress
- Explore opportunities for peer observations and sharing of good practice related to inclusive strategies
- Provide refresher training and further CPD opportunities to deepen staff confidence in supporting pupils with additional needs

Liam Cox
EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER
KETTERING PARK INFANT ACADEMY

Charlotte Pooley
SENCo
KETTERING PARK INFANT ACADEMY

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“The SENCo and SLT complete regular learning walks to see the approach in action and to support the staff with any tweaks necessary.”

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- At Kettering Park, each classroom developed a workstation to support sensory regulation, focus, and independence. For some pupils, this acted as a temporary scaffold towards full classroom inclusion. How might you use physical spaces more flexibly to balance independence and belonging? Could similar ‘transitional’ workstations and/or resources be helpful for supporting reintegration in your setting?
- Teachers were encouraged to plan for difference, not retrofit support. To what extent does your planning model assume difference from the outset? Could there be pupils or year groups in your school who would benefit from a similar approach to embedding adaptation into everyday planning?
- What began as an initiative evolved into embedded practice, reshaping how the school viewed support for pupils with additional needs: regular review meetings and learning walks ensured the model evolved dynamically; staff voice informed next steps and resource development. Could similar two-way feedback processes be helpful for shaping or further developing inclusive practice in your school?
- Leaders observed and recorded subtle signs of progress—confidence, engagement, participation—alongside academic data. These ‘soft’ metrics gave a fuller picture of impact. What systems could you use to record and celebrate progress that is not so readily captured by assessment data but makes a transformative difference to pupil engagement?



KETTERING PARK INFANT ACADEMY



REGION
Northants

246

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Reception-Year 2



BOYS
50%



PP
28%



SEND
22%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION We are a three-form entry infant school. We are amongst the 30% most deprived areas in the UK. We have a successful SEND unit that caters for a range of SEND needs. After many years at 'Requires Improvement', the school achieved a 'Good' rating from Ofsted in 2024. Among the many positives, our support for SEND pupils was highlighted, with the report stating 'The school has high expectations for all pupils, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)'.



THE LENHAM SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Closing the gap: using the EEF 'five-a-day' strategy to enhance outcomes for students with SEND

OUR CONTEXT

Nestled in the heart of the Kent countryside, The Lenham School is a small, rural, non-selective secondary school that prides itself on its warm, welcoming atmosphere and strong sense of community. With a culture rooted in inclusivity and support, the school champions the belief that quality first teaching is the most powerful driver of progress for all learners – especially those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

At Lenham, every student is known, valued, and supported. The school's size fosters close relationships between staff and pupils, while its inclusive ethos ensures that no learner is left behind. This commitment to equity in the classroom has led to a focused and reflective approach to teaching strategies, including the implementation of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) 'five-a-day' framework¹ to strengthen outcomes for SEND students and ensure all learners thrive.

INTENT

This project was driven by a clear and urgent need to better support our cohort of students with SEND, many of whom also face challenges related to low reading ages, working memory, and extended writing. We recognised that we were not always addressing the barriers facing our SEND students consistently, partly linked to staff confidence. As a school that will always thoroughly investigate potential new strategies, we were drawn to the published research and 'five-a-day' framework from the EEF. We felt that the clear, evidence-based approach would allow us to embed those strategies into everyday practice – helping to close the gap between SEND learners and their peers.

Our main aim was to improve the classroom experience and outcomes for students with SEND through the consistent and intentional use of the EEF five-a-day strategies*. Specifically, we wanted to:

- Increase engagement, confidence, and independence in lessons among SEND students.
- Improve retention and recall of key knowledge.
- Develop students' ability to access and produce extended written responses.
- Embed inclusive teaching habits among staff that benefit all learners, not just those with identified needs.

Rather than limiting the initiative to one subject or year group, we aimed to make the five-a-day framework a consistent feature of classroom practice across the school, establishing it as shared language and framework for inclusive instruction, rather than an add-on.

To ensure clarity and accountability, we established the following success criteria:

- Evidence of all five EEF strategies being embedded into every lesson across the unit (recorded through planning and learning walks).
- Improved engagement in lessons from SEND students, measured via seating plan trackers, student voice, and classroom observation.
- Progress in extended writing tasks from SEND students, using before-and-after work samples.
- Staff confidence in using and adapting the five-a-day framework independently, measured through reflection and feedback.

IMPLEMENTATION

The plan was to introduce the EEF five-a-day strategy through a structured, three-phase approach that prioritised clarity, collaboration, and practical application.

It was important to get all stakeholders onside, so I worked closely with our Trust's Director of SEND to ensure that our vision was aligned. Working closely with the school's AHT in charge of SEND and SENDCo, I presented the following to our Leadership Group (LG) so they had a full understanding of the project:

- The rationale for the project, grounded in EEF research
- The intended CPD structure
- The impact it could have on SEND learners and whole-class teaching
- How we would measure success.

With their endorsement, we were given the autonomy to design and deliver the CPD programme, coordinate staff collaboration, and lead on quality assurance in partnership with curriculum leaders and the SENDCo. Key decisions around timetabling CPD, setting expectations for sharing practice, and integrating five-a-day into wider QA processes were made in collaboration with LG and middle leaders.

PHASE 1: LAUNCH AND CPD DELIVERY

We chose to launch the project in Term 6, deliberately timing it to coincide with a point in the academic year when staff typically have more capacity to reflect, trial new approaches, and refine their practice. This allowed for a thoughtful and low-pressure introduction to the EEF five-a-day strategy, with the aim of building strong foundations ahead of full implementation in the new school year.

We began with a series of five focused 'mini' CPD sessions (which we called 'SEND Segments'), each dedicated to one element of the five-a-day framework. These sessions were deliberately concise and hands-on, designed to break down each strategy into actionable steps that staff could immediately implement in their own classrooms. Each session modelled clear examples and provided opportunities for staff to discuss how they might adapt the strategy for their own subjects and students – especially those with SEND. We chose to deliver the sessions in a different space and with a fresh format, to help give this strategy prominence in staff minds.

* The five strategies that comprise this approach are:

1. Explicit instruction; 2. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies; 3. Scaffolding; 4. Flexible grouping; 5. Use of technology



PHASE 2: TRIAL, SHARE AND CELEBRATE PRACTICE

Following each CPD session, staff were encouraged to trial the strategy during that week. To promote collaboration and the sharing of effective practice, staff were asked to upload examples of adapted lesson resources, classroom activities, and student work to a shared online platform. This created a growing bank of practical, peer-led strategies and showcased real-time impact across the curriculum. We also identified practice through our learning walks. These contributions were then publicly celebrated in staff briefings and department meetings, helping to establish a sense of momentum and collective ownership.

PHASE 3: EMBEDDING AND SUSTAINING PRACTICE

As we moved into the new school year, we continued to monitor staff engagement and implementation through a combination of learning walks, student voice, and work scrutiny. The five-a-day principles were fully integrated into all areas of school life – including staff briefings, line management meetings, and whole-school CPD – to ensure they remained at the heart of our approach to teaching and learning.

To support staff with ongoing implementation and development, we created a SEND Segment Padlet – a digital hub filled with resources, exemplars, and practical tools aligned to each of the five-a-day principles. This became a useful reference point that staff could access independently or be directed to as part of coaching or developmental conversations.

Finally, to further embed the strategy and maintain staff engagement, we developed a series of five short videos, each focusing on one of the five-a-day strategies. These included:

- **Live classroom footage of the strategy being used**
- **Student interviews reflecting on its impact**
- **Teacher reflections on planning and adapting the approach.**

These videos were shared through briefings, CPD sessions, and the Padlet, ensuring that the five-a-day framework remained visible, practical, and relevant to all staff. We continued to monitor through a combination of learning walks, student feedback, and work scrutiny, which helped us refine our approach and embed the strategies into our culture.

IMPACT

We measured impact through a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data.

This included:

- Learning walks and classroom observations to see the strategies in action.
- Student voice surveys and focus groups to gather feedback on engagement and understanding.
- Work scrutiny to assess changes in the quality of student work, especially for SEND learners.
- Analysis of internal progress and attainment data to track any shifts over time.

This multifaceted methodology was successful because it captured a broad picture of impact from different angles. The qualitative feedback from students and staff was particularly powerful in highlighting changes in classroom culture and student confidence, while the quantitative data helped validate these observations. Some methods, like learning walks combined with immediate feedback discussions, proved more effective for driving ongoing staff reflection and adaptation.

The accuracy of our findings is supported by triangulating multiple data sources—observation, student voice, and performance data—which reduces bias or overreliance on any one measure. The consistency of themes across different data sets strengthened our confidence in the findings.

The impact of the project exceeded our expectations. Staff engagement throughout the process was exceptionally high, which contributed not only to the successful adoption of the EEF five-a-day strategy but also to a noticeable overall improvement in lesson quality across the school.

Internal data from Years 7 and 8 shows that the progress gap between SEND and non-SEND learners has effectively been eliminated, with some SEND students now making even better progress than their peers. For example, in Year 7 more students either achieved or exceeded their end of year target (3% for students identified as SEND support and a significant 13% for students with an EHCP). In Year 8, a larger proportion of students with SEND support reached their end of year target (albeit 1%) – however, this is a significant improvement on the previous year when the same cohort were 5% behind non-SEND students. In Year 9, where the largest progress gap existed between students with SEND and their peers, the gap between those meeting and exceeding target and those who are not has reduced by 5% over the academic year. When we were inspected in February 2025, inspectors observed no difference in the progress of SEND and non-SEND students in the classroom.

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT INCLUDED:

- Being well-researched and clear in what we wanted to achieve, which ensured that the ‘why’ was a powerful message.
- The phased CPD approach, which made the strategy manageable and kept staff motivated.
- The culture of sharing and celebrating success, which fostered professional collaboration and reduced isolation.
- The quality assurance through learning walks, which maintained momentum and ensured fidelity of implementation.

These elements were critical because they combined practical support with motivation and accountability, which are key for sustainable change.

Key factors for success of the project were:

- Delivering explicit, focused CPD that broke down complex strategies into practical steps.
- Creating a safe space for staff to experiment and share via the online platform and briefings.
- Leadership buy-in, which ensured protected time and resources for the project.

Without these, it would have been difficult to achieve meaningful staff engagement and embed the approach.

The project revealed that while most staff value research-backed strategies, practical application and peer support are essential to translate theory into practice. It also highlighted that ongoing reflection and visible leadership support are crucial to sustaining change. From the findings, we can infer that embedding inclusive teaching strategies requires a whole-school cultural shift, not just individual teacher buy-in.

If repeating the project, I would:

- Build in more opportunities for peer observation and coaching early on, as seeing strategies modelled live can accelerate adoption.
- Offer more differentiated CPD options tailored to different experience levels or departments.
- Perhaps start the project earlier in the year to allow more time for embedding before high-pressure periods.

These changes could help increase early engagement and confidence across the staff body.

The conclusions largely aligned with expectations: embedding the EEF five-a-day strategy positively impacted teaching practice and SEND student engagement, but sustainable change requires ongoing support, reflection, and time. It was encouraging, though not surprising, to see how visible leadership and a culture of celebration amplified engagement. **The importance of combining research with practical, peer-led sharing was reaffirmed, highlighting that successful implementation is as much about culture as content.**

“Internal data from Years 7 and 8 shows that the progress gap between SEND and non-SEND learners has effectively been eliminated, with some SEND students now making even better progress than their peers.”

NEXT STEPS

Building on the strong foundation of the EEF five-a-day strategy, our next steps focus on further strengthening two key areas that offer significant potential for impact: flexible grouping and assistive technologies.

1. FLEXIBLE GROUPING – DEEPENING PRACTICE THROUGH TARGETED CPD

While some staff have begun to explore grouping strategies, we recognise a need for greater clarity and confidence in how to implement flexible grouping effectively. Our next phase involves:

- Delivering dedicated CPD that breaks down the principles of effective grouping, including how to assign roles and responsibilities within groups to promote accountability, collaboration, and inclusion
- Sharing subject-specific examples of how grouping can be adapted to suit different types of lessons and learners, especially those with SEND
- Providing planning tools and lesson templates to make implementation manageable and time efficient

We want this strategy to move beyond theory and become a visible, consistent part of classroom practice across the school.

2. ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES – LEVERAGING OUR APPLE SCHOOL STATUS

As a school that uses Apple technology, and where all students have iPads to support their learning, we are uniquely positioned to lead on the use of technology to support all learners, including those with SEND. Our next steps include:

- Encouraging all teaching staff to complete Apple Teacher Training badges, helping boost confidence and skill in using built-in accessibility tools and apps
- Establishing a Regional Apple Training Centre within our school to support internal staff development and create a group of in-house technology experts who can model and mentor others
- Integrating assistive technologies into future CPD and lesson planning support to ensure they become part of everyday teaching, rather than an add-on.

SCALING UP THE PROJECT

The success of our five-a-day implementation has given us a proven model for driving whole-school change. We are now applying this model to other initiatives, using the same approach of:

- Short, focused CPD
- Peer sharing and visibility
- Celebrating success
- Quality assurance linked to classroom practice and student outcomes.

We believe this approach ensures change is both scalable and sustainable.

Robert Davies

DEPUTY HEADTEACHER / QUALITY OF EDUCATION
THE LENHAM SCHOOL

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“The project revealed that while most staff value research-backed strategies, practical application and peer support are essential to translate theory into practice.”



ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- At Lenham School, EEF research was distilled into practical examples that worked in mixed-ability classrooms, supporting literacy, memory, and engagement for learners with SEND. How do you ensure that research evidence filters into planning in a way that feels realistic and relevant to subject teams?
- Teachers uploaded examples of their adapted lessons and resources to a shared platform, celebrating progress and encouraging professional dialogue. Could similar collaborative spaces—digital or physical—where inclusive practice is routinely shared and celebrated be helpful in your setting?
- Robert has described how SEND students’ engagement and confidence were monitored through soft data, such as observations and student/staff voice, and reflected in incremental progress. Small wins were publicly acknowledged. What systems could you introduce to notice, record, and celebrate the small but powerful steps of progression in SEND students’ learning?
- Five-a-day principles were woven into QA processes, lesson planning templates, and CPD cycles, securing long-term consistency. How could you build inclusive frameworks into your school’s existing systems—so they remain in place even as staff or priorities change?

THE LENHAM SCHOOL



REGION
Kent

850

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7-13



BOYS
49.6%

PP
28.2%

SEND
22.8%

HPA
12.2%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION The Lenham School is part of Valley Invicta Academies Trust (VIAT) which includes three other secondary schools. The school is located in a small rural village on the outskirts of two busy towns. This results in the catchment area being quite large.



BY CONCERO & NASEN

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

That's magic! Digitally inclusive solutions for pupils and budgets

THE PROBLEM

As you started your day today, you might be feeling the pinch, or could this feel more like a crushing squeeze? The squeeze of time constraints, the squeeze of capacity, the squeeze of budgets; it's a tough climate right now in education, our members tell us so, and we at nasen see it in our direct work with schools and settings. And SENDCos especially may feel more akin to David Copperfield, conjuring provision and support magically in classrooms, seemingly out of thin air! However, we are far from the dizzying lights of Vegas now. 81% of SENDCos report struggling with budgets¹, which is not the kind of headliner we want to see, especially when we see the increasing needs of our pupils. Recent figures released by the Office of National Statistics highlight the growing demand: the overall percentage² of pupils in school in England who are identified with SEND, and require support to meet their needs, is **19.5%** – almost 1 out of every 5 children in our classrooms. So, we can see in real terms the challenges SENDCos and school leaders face in providing the kind of high-quality personalised teaching and learning experiences that really benefit all pupils.

THE SOLUTION

SENDCos can 'pull a rabbit out of the hat' by supporting their colleagues to develop inclusive teaching practices. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)³ provides a framework for teachers to reference when thinking about how to create fully inclusive teaching and learning experiences. At the heart of the UDL guidelines are the core themes of 'engagement,' 'representation,' and 'action and expression.' Each theme encourages practitioners to broaden experiences and opportunities for pupils to engage in their learning in multiple different ways, harnessing the myriad ways of thinking and being, and exploring learning in a personalised and bespoke way. Here, pupils might have a variety of ways of engaging in a subject, such as using a hands-on experience or role play, or using visual cues and prompts, or viewing a video clip with closed captions.

Equally, potential barriers to learning and engagement can be overcome for pupils by permitting creative and inclusive ways for them to demonstrate their knowledge, such as through content creation, like making a podcast or video clip, or a visual journal, where traditional methods may have previously been unsuccessful. And with 57% of teachers⁴ sharing that pupil engagement is an increasing issue for them, exploring ways to improve this is key.

A key feature of inclusive teaching and learning is to utilise and mobilise the power of digital tools to transform the learning experience for pupils, and consequently improve engagement. Digital technology allows for teachers to vary teaching methods, respond to individual needs and personalise the learning experience for all pupils, as well as pupils with SEND.

When strategically implemented through a clear whole-school vision, digital tools may come pretty close to the 'magic wand' SENDCos so frequently, and sorely, wish they had. We also know that the digitalisation of the learning environment is a key theme for many educators, with 68% of secondary schools and 55% of primary schools now putting a digital strategy in place⁵, and so embedding real-time use of these in classrooms should be a priority for all.

“We recognised the growing role of technology in creating inclusive classrooms and knew that, to support our community well, we needed a digital partner who could help us bring this to life.”

WHAT TOOLS CAN WE USE?

What's even better news than winning free tickets to a Las Vegas Magic Show? The fact that digital tools are probably available in your classrooms right now, without having to have a major budget overhaul to realise... now that is a digitally inclusive solution! Each pupil in school is likely to have a Microsoft 365 account, which provides access to some of the most useful digitally inclusive learning tools without any additional costs – tools such as:

- **Speech-to-Text, dictation**
- **Text-to-Speech, read aloud**
- **Immersive reader.**

These simple yet effective tools can open up learning experiences for pupils, particularly in relation to overcoming literacy barriers, freeing them to think and learn creatively. Also, the in-built accessibility tool allows teachers to check their content creation, ensuring that everything presented to all pupils is the most accessible it can be for the widest audience. If only there was a way of supporting schools to make the most of these accessibility tools they already have, without adding to budget pressures or creating extra work for staff.

At nasen, we recognised the growing role of technology in creating inclusive classrooms and knew that, to support our community well, we needed a digital partner who could help us bring this to life. A partner who would work alongside us, combining our knowledge of SEND practice with their understanding of school infrastructure, helping schools and SENDCos turn digital tools into meaningful, everyday solutions.

POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

We weren't looking for just an IT provider. We wanted to find a partner who understood education – who shared our values and could help translate technology into something practical and purposeful for schools. That's where we found Concero Education Technology. With their roots in education and a track record of supporting schools and the public sector, Concero have delivered for the Department for Education, and partnered with IT giants such as Google and Microsoft – they understand both the opportunities and the challenges that schools face every day.

Since 2023, nasen and Concero have worked together to create initiatives that help schools harness the power of the accessibility tools already at their fingertips – together, we've pooled our knowledge, experience, and expertise to support schools in moving towards the goal of digital inclusion, no dramatic illusions needed.

Our most recent work together started life as a simple question: how can we help schools do more with what they already have? This wasn't a campaign dreamed up in a boardroom – it was shaped by what we were hearing from schools every day. Schools telling us that budgets were tighter than ever, and yet many were unknowingly paying for accessibility tools already built into the Microsoft and Google platforms they use daily.

In one case, Concero worked with a School Trust and helped them identify £20,000 of savings, simply by reviewing what was already in place and removing duplication.

That's why we created a free checklist to help SENDCos and school leaders quickly identify where they might be paying twice for the same tools – speech-to-text, screen readers, captioning, high contrast modes, and more. If these features are already included in your platform licences, that's budget that could be freed up and reinvested elsewhere.

And when we asked SENDCos in our 2024 survey, **“What do you wish you could afford, but are struggling to find the budget for?”** the top three responses were clear: staff development and training, access to specialist support, and better resources for pupils⁶. This campaign helps schools move closer to those goals.

To support this further, we've developed a practical 3-step plan:

STEP 1: ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TRAINING

Empowering staff to use the tools they already have, without needing additional paid-for software. Practical, hands-on training helps build confidence and unlock the accessibility features already available in your school's existing platforms.

STEP 2: DFE BENCHMARK REVIEW

A clear assessment of your school's digital infrastructure, focused on accessibility, security, and sustainability. This independent review highlights where savings can be made and what areas need further investment – an ideal starting point for SLT discussions.

STEP 3: ESCALATION SUPPORT

Sometimes, schools just need that extra pair of hands. Whether troubleshooting a technical issue or planning next steps, expert support is available when you need it most, working alongside your existing teams.

“This isn't just about saving money – it's about maximising your SEND investment and reinvesting in what matters most.”

By reviewing existing tools and making smarter use of digital resources, schools can build stronger, more inclusive systems, ensuring long-term sustainability and better outcomes for everyone.

We know SENDCos are often the ones quietly pulling off the impossible. We recognise that –and are committed to offering support that doesn't require smoke and mirrors. Just real tools, real savings, and a real way forward.

Explore the full campaign and access your free checklist at: nasen.org.uk/concero-school-offer

Samantha McFarlane
EDUCATION OFFICER
NASEN

Nadiah Sweilem
MARKETING MANAGER
CONCERO UK

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ABOUT CONCERO

Concero helps schools lead change, rather than waiting for it. From small primary schools to MATs, they help every school find freedom and confidence in technology – secure, simple, and built around people. Find out more at www.concero.education

ABOUT NASEN

We are the National Association for Special Educational Needs – a charity and leading professional membership body dedicated to promoting the education, training, advancement, and development of individuals with special educational needs, disabilities, or learning differences. Find out more at www.nasen.org.uk



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WESSEX PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS1-2

Bridging the gap: recognising the intersectional vulnerability of, and strengthening outcomes for, pupils who have SEND and are eligible for Pupil Premium funding

CONTEXT

Wessex Primary School is a two-form entry school currently experiencing a decline in pupil numbers, particularly across Foundation Stage 2, Year 1, and Year 2. This falling roll presents both challenges and opportunities for future planning and resource allocation. Our school serves a diverse community and we have a notably high proportion of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), accounting for 17% of the pupil body. This includes 5.2% of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and a further 11.8% identified as requiring SEN Support (SEN K). In addition, 26.5% of pupils are eligible for Pupil Premium funding, reflecting a significant level of socio-economic disadvantage. These intersecting contextual factors shape our school priorities, highlighting the need for a robust, data-informed approach to ensure that the most vulnerable learners—those who are both Pupil Premium and SEND—receive targeted, meaningful support that improves both academic and personal outcomes.

UNDERSTANDING OVERLAP AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

The project began with a clear focus on the 18 pupils who were identified as both eligible for Pupil Premium (PP) and SEND. This dual vulnerability group represented those children most likely to experience multiple and compounding barriers to learning, including lower attendance, reduced access to enrichment experiences, and complex social-emotional needs. The intention was to identify at least one targeted action for each child—academic, social, emotional, or experiential—to ensure support extended beyond classroom attainment and addressed the whole child. However, it was equally important to understand how each pupil's experience was perceived by those closest to them: their teachers, their families, and the pupils themselves.

IMPLEMENTATION

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING THROUGH TRIANGULATION AND REFLECTION USING THE HORSFORTH QUADRANT

To deepen understanding of individual needs, we introduced the Horsforth Quadrant model. This reflective tool enables the triangulation of perspectives between key stakeholders: teachers, parents, and the children themselves. Questionnaires were designed to gather insight into each child's learning experience, emotional wellbeing, and perceived barriers. The resulting visual quadrants highlighted both alignment and disparity between viewpoints.

This process proved invaluable. We held a dedicated staff meeting to analyse the completed quadrants collectively, encouraging open discussion about how staff, families, and pupils may interpret behaviours or progress differently. The reflective nature of this exercise led to powerful professional dialogue. Teachers reported gaining a deeper understanding of contextual influences and recognising the bias or subjectivity inherent in their own judgements. This reflective process became an important step in shifting our school's culture—from reactive support to proactive understanding. It encouraged teachers to consider how communication with families and pupils could be strengthened to achieve a more rounded, collaborative view of progress.

DEVELOPING A DATA-INFORMED APPROACH

A comprehensive tracking and analysis document was developed to monitor attendance, attainment, and progress over time for all Pupil Premium pupils, using the PiXL framework for benchmarking and standardised language. The document is updated termly and is now embedded into school monitoring cycles.

This evolving system has become central to our school's strategy. It allows leaders and teachers to:

- Identify trends across cohorts and year groups
- Pinpoint children requiring additional or adjusted support
- Cross-reference academic performance with contextual data, including attendance and wellbeing indicators
- Inform the focus of pupil progress meetings and intervention planning

The matrix generated from our Management Information System (MIS) is now integrated into termly pupil progress meetings. This tool captures whether each pupil has made steady, accelerated, or limited progress, enabling us to view performance over time and make evidence-informed decisions about next steps. The inclusion of contextual indicators—such as SEND status, attendance rates, and intervention history—has made the process more holistic and strategic. The result is a shared understanding among leaders and teachers of where the greatest needs and opportunities for impact lie.

ENSURING QUALITY AND PURPOSE IN INTERVENTION

Following the introduction of the data matrix, all interventions across the school were systematically reviewed to ensure they were structured, evidence-based, and matched to the identified barriers to learning. The current suite of interventions now includes:

- **Read Write Inc. (RWI) Fast Track Phonics and RWI Fresh Start for targeted literacy recovery**
- **Speech and Language Therapy Plans for pupils with identified communication needs**
- **Attention Autism and Precision Teaching to develop engagement and retention**
- **PiXL interventions for focused, data-driven academic improvement**

This refinement has ensured that every intervention is purposeful, measurable, and aligned with the school's improvement priorities. Progress within these interventions is monitored through both formative teacher observation and summative tracking, allowing staff to evaluate impact and adapt provision in real time. The review process also encouraged us to consider what to stop doing—eliminating duplication, outdated programmes, and interventions lacking demonstrable impact.² This has resulted in greater consistency, improved staff confidence, and clearer lines of accountability.

¹ For those unfamiliar with The Horsforth Quadrant: it is a quadrant on which you plot students' progress against their effort. It was first developed by Horsforth School in Leeds, and PiXL have subsequently developed resources and guidance for how it can be used. Your PiXL Specialist will be able to speak to you about it.

² We are big believers at PiXL that stopping doing something can be as powerful as starting. Check out our Leadership Thinking Guide on getting serious about subtraction to explore this more.

IMPACT

SHIFTING CULTURE AND PRACTICE

While the project is ongoing, early outcomes indicate both cultural and procedural impact:

- **Greater consistency in data use:** Staff now approach progress meetings with a stronger understanding of how multiple data sources (academic, attendance, contextual) intersect.
- **Improved staff reflection:** The Horsforth Quadrant exercise fostered greater professional empathy and critical self-reflection, prompting staff to view children's needs through a wider social and emotional lens.
- **Targeted provision:** The refined intervention offer ensures that each Pupil Premium or SEND pupil receives the right support at the right time.
- **Leadership alignment:** SEND and Pupil Premium strategies are now more closely interwoven, promoting coherence in planning and reporting.
- **Parental partnership:** Increased dialogue through the quadrant process has strengthened trust and collaboration with families.

While quantitative outcomes (attainment and progress) are still under review, qualitative evidence already suggests improved engagement, more focused teaching strategies, and a shared sense of ownership among staff.

KEY INSIGHTS

The project underscored the importance of understanding intersectionality in education. Pupils who are both eligible for the Pupil Premium and have SEND often face overlapping barriers that cannot be addressed through isolated strategies. Success depends on:

- Integrated leadership between SEND and Pupil Premium leads
- Data that captures both academic and emotional dimensions of learning
- Time for staff reflection and dialogue about perception, bias, and pupil voice
- A shared belief that small, evidence-informed adjustments can produce significant long-term gains

It also reaffirmed for us that professional learning is most powerful when grounded in real pupil stories and collaborative reflection.

NEXT STEPS

EMBEDDING AND SUSTAINING PRACTICE

Building on this foundation, the next phase of development will focus on:

- Embedding the use of the tracking and analysis tool into all pupil progress meetings and performance discussions
- Extending the quadrant process to other vulnerable groups (e.g. pupils with attendance concerns or social care involvement)
- Evaluating intervention impact longitudinally, tracking academic and emotional progress over multiple terms
- Enhancing staff training on metacognition, adaptive teaching, and inclusive practice, ensuring classroom strategies reflect current evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and SEND frameworks

By continuing to align Pupil Premium and SEND priorities, we aim to develop a cohesive, whole-school model of inclusion—one that recognises complexity, values reflection, and uses evidence to drive improvement.

CONCLUSION

This project has demonstrated that when we take time to listen—to families, to teachers, and to pupils themselves—the insights gained can transform provision. The combination of reflective tools, data-driven analysis, and purposeful intervention has strengthened our understanding of our most vulnerable learners and created the conditions for sustained improvement.

Hannah Denning
ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER & SENCO
WESSEX PRIMARY SCHOOL



“This project has demonstrated that when we take time to listen – to families, to teachers, and to pupils themselves – the insights gained can transform provision.”

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Wessex Primary School identified pupils who were both SEND and eligible for Pupil Premium funding, recognising the compounded risk created by this overlap. In your school or setting, which intersecting groups might be most vulnerable, and how might a clear set of criteria help you identify them early?
- The school used a triangulation tool to compare teacher, parent, and pupil perspectives, highlighting differences in perception that shaped provision. Would it be useful in your context to adopt (or adapt) a similar tool to explore how experiences differ across stakeholders, and what might this reveal about unmet needs or overlooked strengths?
- Professional dialogue was central: staff met to reflect on the quadrant outcomes and challenge assumptions. How often do your teams have protected time to reflect collaboratively on pupil stories, bias, and context - and what might deeper reflective practice unlock for your most vulnerable learners?
- SEND and Pupil Premium leadership were deliberately aligned, strengthening coherence and shared accountability. Are there opportunities in your setting to bring these leadership areas closer together, perhaps through joint planning, shared data reviews, or coordinated reporting?

WESSEX PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
Berkshire

347

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Reception-Year 6



BOYS
51%



PP
26.5%



SEND
17%



DR SARAH MARTIN-DENHAM

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Pull up a Chair: amplifying the voices of children and young people with school-based anxiety through the creative arts

We asked Dr Sarah Martin-Denham to share some of her work in this publication having first heard her speak at an inclusion conference, where she described the impact her #pullupachair project had on supporting young people who were experiencing school-based anxiety – something that we know disproportionately affects young people with SEND, in particular those with neurodiversity or SEMH needs. In this article, Sarah shares more about her approach including why the creative arts are such an excellent vehicle for her inclusive practice (and you can read more about that from Gary Lobbett on page 100).

ABOUT #PULLUPACHAIR

In a world where many children and young people struggle to be heard, #pullupachair offers a safe, supported space to be able to share what matters to them.

“Pull up a Chair helped me really raise my confidence level and be able to speak to new people. I’m really glad I did it because I have made some great friends for life.” DAISY

#pullupchair is more than a hashtag. It's a creative arts-based approach that empowers children and young people who otherwise might not have a voice to be heard. #pullupachair uses the creative arts as a platform for children and families to share their views, wishes and feelings. To date, 23 #pullupachair films have been co-created with children and young people, including:

- **NINE FILMS** with children aged 5-16 years previously excluded from school (including a free training toolkit for schools in recognising and responding to adversity, forging belonging relationships and connections, and finding solutions to prevent exclusion from school)
- **EIGHT FILMS** with caregivers of children previously excluded from school
- **THREE FILMS** with children 11-16 years newly arrived from Ukraine
- **TWO FILMS** with children who struggle to go to school due to anxiety
- **ONE FILM** with young people aged 16-21 reflecting on their secondary mainstream schooling

The approach is grounded in relational practice, trauma-informed approaches, and co-production. Many children, particularly those who have experienced challenges at school or home, may find it difficult to articulate their thoughts and feelings verbally. Pull up a Chair offers a range of creative ways for children to express themselves and communicate their thoughts in a safe and supported space. Creative arts are a powerful tool for enabling children to express their voice, especially those who may not have the confidence to communicate their feelings through traditional means.

“Pull up a Chair matters so there are less children struggling and more people understand their emotions and feelings. Knowing there are more people with similar experiences. I have made friends for life.” LUCY

“Pull up a Chair has given our family a voice. It has given our children confidence to share their experience and a belief that their opinion matters. It has created a feeling of acceptance and belonging, demonstrating true inclusion, delivering on its promise. It has provided friendship, support and hope for the future.” ANNE – PARENT

WHY #PULLUPACHAIR MATTERS

Children are experts in their own lives. When we take the time to listen and hear what they are saying, we can learn about their strengths, the barriers they face, the support they need, and the dreams they hold. By listening to them we can shape adjustments that meet their needs and adapt policies and practices that work for them **and for all children** – all of which fosters an inclusive school environment. It helps us to:

- **Reflect on and understand the reasons for children's behaviours**
- **Develop places of safety where children can thrive and learn**
- **Embed authentic co-production and decision making with children and families**
- **Empower children to articulate their feelings**

“Pull up a Chair made me realise I wasn't the only one with worries. I have made good friends and feel less worried.” FRANKIE

“Pull up a Chair has given me the voice, I am afraid to say, that others took away from me. School and other professionals made me doubt my sanity and my judgement over the health of my children. Sarah and her team gave it back to me and solidified my conviction that school can and is making some children ill. A lack of understanding left us at a stalemate. My children found warmth, understanding at pullupachair as did I.” EMILY – PARENT

WHY CREATIVE ARTS?

Creative arts research places children at the heart of the narrative. It shifts power dynamics, enabling children and families to express what they want to say, their way. The arts can help children process and articulate complex emotions and make sense of their experiences. Through storytelling, painting, building, making, crafting or performance, they can explore mattering, belonging and their feelings, revealing insights that might otherwise remain hidden.

WHAT A #PULLUPACHAIR LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Funded #pullupachair projects are over five non-consecutive days, working with a group of up to 12 children. I work with a very talented team: Ruth Johnson (Theatre Maker) and Laura Degnan (Film Maker). Together we plan the first day then hand creative control to the children. With support, they decide what to say, how to say it and the resources they need (often including a showstopper).

BEFORE THE PROJECT BEGINS

- Finalising the focus and key questions
- Identifying children and young people who would like to take part
- Gaining consent (from children and their caregivers for U16s)
- WhatsApp chats with caregivers to build a relationship and find out the children's interests, any accessibility/health/SEND, dietary needs, previous experiences, any information that they think we need to know
- Risk assessments (and, for research, ethics permission and consent)
- Sometimes, a quick chat with children to check I have everything they need in place for day one of #pullupachair (with caregivers present on the call)
- Finding out if they need a trusted adult with them and arranging this in advance

THE MAIN EVENT

A typical day is from 10am–2pm, with flexibility for children who need alternative arrangements (e.g., '#pullupachair by post').

The first ten minutes are crucial:

- A safe, familiar space (school or community venue)
- A welcoming activity that ensures success
- A therapy dog (ours or theirs)
- Time and space to settle in

Everything is planned; nothing is left to chance. Laura introduces the camera; some children like to have a go at filming. Everything that is included in the film is their words.

The other four days are co-created with the children taking the lead. The types of creative approaches we have used ensure there is no right or wrong answer. It is important they all feel they have succeeded in creating and contributing to their film.

Recent examples include:

- Blackout poetry (deleting words to form a new poem)
- Cardboard bricks (to build an ideal school, each brick with a solution to an issue)
- Graffiti art (to express emotions)
- Masks (how we appear on the outside but what is happening inside)
- Origami (making boxes, butterflies and rockets to share messages)
- Puppets (my different feelings)
- Russian dolls (the layers of my feelings)
- Song writing (to tell my story)
- Stop-motion animation (my experiences and emotions)

“Pull up a Chair was helpful for me as it was a comforting, helpful and safe space to ‘learn’ in. We were able to create a piece of work that many are able to see and they can also learn from it.” WILL

Throughout the project, the children and caregivers review the film, suggesting additions and changes. This matters because it is their film and their messages to give.

AFTER THE PROJECT

The caregivers of the children and the children themselves have talked about how they feel empowered after taking part in Pull up a Chair. Sustained friendships have been formed and they are visibly more confident. Often, these projects occur where schools or local authorities struggle to understand children’s challenges. The films and insights generated help inform meaningful, relevant solutions. For example, introducing mindfulness activities, providing discreet passes from class, ideas for how to ask children questions about the support they need.

WHERE TO FIND #PULLUPACHAIR

Visit www.sunderland.ac.uk/more/research/thematic-research-areas/interdisciplinary-research-networks/ace/ to view the films and access the training toolkits to reduce preventable exclusion from school.

IN SUMMARY

#pullupachair doesn’t just give children a voice; it gives them a stage, a canvas, and the confidence to be heard.

HOW SCHOOLS CAN GET INVOLVED

- **Get in touch:** We can offer a #pullupachair across the UK
- **Reflect on your practice:** Which children are you most concerned about? Could #pullupachair offer a new approach?
- **Use the films and toolkits:** Integrate them into staff training and explore leading your own #pullupachair project.
- **Adopt the #pullupachair model:** The films will give you an insight into the type of creative approaches we have used – have a go!
- **Use the hashtag #pullupachair:** Share your work and tag Sarah Martin-Denham on LinkedIn.

Dr Sarah Martin-Deham

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CARE AND EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF SUNDERLAND**

ABOUT DR SARAH MARTIN-DENHAM

Sarah Martin-Denham is an Associate Professor of Care and Education at the University of Sunderland, with a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people through evidence-based practice and policy development. Her research focuses on inclusive education, supporting children from underserved groups, and mental health, with a particular emphasis on supporting vulnerable learners and reducing exclusions in schools.

Sarah has led and contributed to numerous high-impact projects, including large-scale reviews and toolkit development for schools and local authorities. With extensive experience in collaborating across sectors, Sarah’s work bridges research and practice, ensuring that findings translate into meaningful change in classrooms and communities. She regularly publishes in peer-reviewed journals, speaks at national conferences, and advises on policy initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive and supportive educational environments.





EXPLORING ENHANCED PROVISION



**BEDFONT PRIMARY SCHOOL**

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS2

Using an alternative nurture-based approach in KS2 to support access to traditional classroom teaching and environments

OUR CONTEXT

Our school serves a diverse community, with some parts of the local area ranking among the most deprived in the region (London Borough of Hounslow, 2021).¹ Situated right next to London Heathrow, we experience high mobility, with many pupils new to the country (with varying levels of English proficiency), and many of whom are completely new to formal education. Currently, over 50 different languages are spoken by our pupils and their families, with 74% of our pupils having English as an Additional Language (EAL). Additionally, over 20% of our pupils are eligible for Pupil Premium Grant (PPG) funding, highlighting the socio-economic challenges many of our families face. We believe that this figure is likely to be higher, with the introduction of universal free school meals in London causing some families to no longer register as eligible for Pupil Premium funding (Schools Week, 2023²). In addition, nearly 20% of our pupils have an identified Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND), with this figure growing steadily.

PHASE 1: PLANNING, IDENTIFICATION AND INTRODUCTION

Our journey began with a clear aim: to develop a nurturing alternative for a small group of Key Stage 2 pupils who struggled to thrive in conventional classroom settings. Identification of these pupils was rooted in collaborative conversations with class teachers, teaching assistants and phase leaders, as well as through analysis of behavioural, attendance and SEND data by leaders at a whole-school level. The pupils selected often demonstrated dysregulation, emotional difficulties, or struggled with the demands of a busy, language-rich environment.

We then assigned a dedicated base for the provision, initially named Osprey but later renamed The Nest to evoke warmth, comfort and a sense of security. The naming aligned with our system of naming each class after birds and reflected the ethos of nurture and belonging that we wanted The Nest to provide. The staffing of The Nest was approached with equal care: we selected two members of staff to lead this space based on their skills, enthusiasm and prior experience working with vulnerable learners. These staff members received additional CPD to support them in managing a therapeutic and responsive environment. We allocated a modest budget to set up the room, allowing the team to bring a wealth of creative ideas to life: the result was a carefully designed, calming, low-stimulation environment equipped for emotional regulation and tailored learning.

Initially, the intent was for pupils to complete learning tasks aligned with their year group's curriculum, simply in a quieter, supportive space. However, as the year progressed, flexibility became central. The provision evolved into a hybrid model: some pupils were based predominantly in The Nest, while others accessed it intermittently for movement breaks, regulation support or during social times. This adaptability allowed staff to meet individual needs without rigid entry or exit criteria, reinforcing the idea that inclusion should adapt to the child, not the other way around (OECD, 2025).³

PHASE 2: PERFORM, MONITOR AND IMPROVE

As The Nest became embedded in school life, our focus shifted towards responsiveness and reflection. The staff working in the provision liaised continuously with class teachers and leaders, sharing strategies and adapting provision to best support both academic access and social-emotional growth. Over time, a more bespoke offer emerged, with no two pupils receiving exactly the same support as the journey of each child was individually (and informally) mapped and continually reassessed.

PEDAGOGY

A wide range of pedagogical approaches were used within The Nest, tailored to the emotional and developmental needs of each pupil. For some, the priority was resetting and regulating before any academic engagement could take place. For others, direct support with emotional literacy or co-regulation strategies was key. Learning activities were carefully paced, sensory needs were considered and emotional wellbeing was always prioritised. The flexibility of the space and expertise of the staff enabled us to respond effectively to fluctuating needs across the week, or even across the day.

UNSTRUCTURED TIME

Through ongoing review and reflective dialogue, it became clear that unstructured times of the day, particularly lunchtimes, were proving especially difficult for many of the pupils accessing The Nest. Incidents of conflict with peers and emotional dysregulation were frequently linked to these less structured periods. In response, the team developed a proactive strategy: designing a series of structured lunchtime games which could be taught to pupils in PE lessons and used by SMSAs. These activities were shared through targeted CPD, giving lunchtime staff practical tools to support inclusion and prevent conflict. In addition, all staff were equipped with restorative conversation prompts to guide calm and constructive resolution when issues arose, fostering consistency and emotional growth.

WIDER BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT STRATEGY

A significant development during this phase was the integration of The Nest team into the school's wider behaviour support strategy. When classroom behaviours escalated and standard strategies had been exhausted, staff could radio for assistance. Nest staff provided immediate support, which not only helped to de-escalate incidents quickly but also freed up senior leaders to focus more strategically amidst reducing leadership capacity in school. Behaviour was a school-wide priority on our School Development Plan (SDP), and The Nest played a central role in this. Regular reflective conversations were held between The Nest team, class teachers, phase leaders and the senior leadership team. This enabled consistent monitoring of behavioural trends and informed adaptive planning. Although we had initially intended to run scheduled interventions within the provision, the complexity of pupil needs meant our staff needed to remain available and responsive at all times. This shift reinforced our commitment to meeting pupils where they are, both figuratively and literally.

“The result was a carefully designed, calming, low-stimulation environment equipped for emotional regulation and tailored learning.”



Crucially, The Nest did not function in isolation. It formed part of a wider cultural shift, promoting inclusion and emotional safety across the whole school. As staff confidence grew, so too did the breadth of pupils supported, with ripple effects felt far beyond the walls of the provision. Pupils accessing The Nest increasingly demonstrated improved regulation, greater emotional resilience and an enhanced ability to re-integrate into class settings, affirming that, with the right environment and relationships, every child can succeed.

IMPACT

The introduction of The Nest has had a significant and multifaceted impact on both the pupils accessing the provision and the wider school environment. While we have monitored formal behaviour data throughout the year, much of the most meaningful insight has come from the collection of 'warm data', a concept coined by Nora Bateson that provides contextual and relational information about complex systems (Bateson Institute).⁴ This warm data, captured through informal observations, pupil voice, staff reflections and everyday interactions, has been instrumental in shaping the evolution of the provision.

SUCCESSSES

The Nest has become widely recognised by pupils as a safe, trusted, and emotionally available space. Pupils who regularly access the provision now show a greater ability to name, reflect on and regulate their emotions. Staff have observed that these pupils are more likely to communicate feelings constructively and use strategies modelled by adults in the space. For many, the tented sensory corner or simply the calm atmosphere has offered a vital pause point to reset before rejoining classroom learning. A particularly encouraging outcome has been the decrease in emotional outbursts and the need for removals from class for those frequently supported by The Nest. Pupils who previously struggled to complete tasks in the main classroom have experienced success working in this quieter, lower-stimulation environment, which has positively impacted their academic confidence and sense of achievement.

The reach of The Nest has also been wider than initially anticipated. Fourteen pupils have received focused ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) input, while we estimate that around 75% of Year 5 and 6 pupils have accessed support from The Nest during the year. Half of Year 4 pupils have sought help, and the entire cohort has benefitted from outreach work completed by staff who run The Nest, primarily in the form of in-class behaviour support and modelling. In addition, over 30 pupils have accessed the Nurture Breakfast provision, helping them to transition calmly and positively into the school day.

CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Despite its successes, implementation has not been without challenges. As awareness of the provision has grown, so too has demand, at times exceeding the capacity of the space and staff to provide individualised support. There have also been occasions where pupils were sent to The Nest without prior coordination, resulting in upset or confusion when no adult was available. These incidents have prompted a renewed focus on communication systems and a shared understanding of the purpose of the provision. Another learning point was the need to manage pupil perception. For a small number of pupils, The Nest risked becoming a means to avoid classroom demands rather than a space to support regulation and return. In response, staff have reinforced clear boundaries and expectations around the use of the provision, ensuring it remains restorative and not avoidant.

PUPIL VOICE

The most compelling evidence of impact comes directly from the pupils themselves. Their reflections capture the emotional significance of the space:

“I found it most helpful that if you feel sad or angry, you can go there and calm down.”

“I use the tent to calm down without anyone disturbing me.”

“The staff in The Nest are always ready to listen to what I have to say.”

“I find it helpful when I’m sad or angry and can talk to adults about my feelings.”

“It’s comfortable to be in when you’re mad.”

These comments reflect not only the practical benefits of the provision but also the deep emotional trust pupils place in the space and the adults within it.

LOOKING FORWARD

The Nest has proven to be more than just a room: it is a reflection of our commitment to inclusion, emotional wellbeing and adaptability. The provision will continue to evolve in response to both data and lived experience. Our next steps include expanding CPD for all staff to further embed restorative and trauma-informed practices, refining referral processes, and maintaining a responsive approach rooted in warm data, compassion and flexibility.

To ensure sustainability, we are also mindful of the need for strategic succession planning. As with any successful initiative reliant on key personnel, we recognise the importance of building a wider staff skillset and leadership capacity to secure longevity. In parallel, we are navigating the financial pressures of a falling roll as part of a wider issue of falling pupil numbers across the Local Authority and must carefully manage available resources to keep the provision viable. Ongoing evaluation and creative budgeting will be essential in protecting what has become a vital part of our inclusive culture, ensuring that The Nest remains a consistent and dependable space for the pupils who need it most.

Stephen Crinall
ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER
BEDFONT PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Stephen has described the significance of clear purpose and boundaries, how the Nest risked being seen as an 'escape' from lessons until staff reinforced its role as a restorative, not avoidant, space. If you have an internal alternative provision, or similar, do all staff and pupils share a clear understanding of its purpose? How do you communicate its role in learning?
- Leaders used "warm data" for decision making – informal observations, pupil voice, and relational insights – alongside behaviour logs to shape provision responsively. Could there be similar benefits in capturing and using relational or pupil-led evidence in addition to formal data to guide inclusive practice in your school or setting?
- CPD for all staff in restorative and therapeutic approaches helped to build consistency, ensuring The Nest's impact rippled across classrooms and the wider school culture. Are there similar opportunities for developing staff confidence and restorative culture in your setting - for building whole-staff confidence so that nurture-informed strategies extend beyond a single space or team?

BEDFONT PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
London

550

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Nursery-Year 6



BOYS
53%



PP
20%



SEND
20%



ASHBY FIELDS PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Introducing an Enhanced Mainstream Classroom to support the reduction of fixed-term exclusions

ENHANCED MAINSTREAM CLASSROOMS

In response to the increasing need for inclusive strategies to manage and support children with behavioural and emotional difficulties, many schools are introducing Enhanced Mainstream Classrooms (EMCs). These specialist provisions are designed to function within mainstream schools, offering tailored support to pupils at risk of fixed-term exclusions. The primary goal of EMCs is to create a structured, supportive environment that helps children develop the skills they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, while also reducing the need for punitive measures such as exclusion.

OUR GOAL

This project was essential in addressing a growing concern around the number of fixed-term exclusions for children with complex social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs. At Ashby Fields Primary School, where 14% of pupils are on the SEND register, there was a clear need for a more inclusive and proactive approach to behaviour support. The aim was to reduce exclusions by introducing an EMC – a structured, therapeutic space within the school designed to provide intensive, personalised intervention.

The plan was to run the project over the 2024-25 academic year, starting with the establishment of the EMC in the summer term of 2024. Staff involved included the SENDCo, teaching assistants, and mainstream class teachers, all working collaboratively to identify needs, deliver support, and facilitate reintegration. The EMC would offer tailored emotional and behavioural interventions, with each child following an individual support plan. The overarching goal was to reduce exclusions, improve emotional regulation, maintain academic engagement, and develop staff

confidence in managing complex needs, all while fostering a more inclusive school culture. Success would be measured through behavioural tracking, reintegration outcomes, and progress data, supported by tools like the 'Measuring What We Value' assessment framework.

HOW WE APPROACHED THE PROJECT

The EMC project was implemented as a targeted provision to support children with significant SEMH needs who were at risk of fixed-term exclusions. The implementation began with the set-up of a designated, calming and structured classroom space in the summer term of 2024, with the full programme running from September 2024 to August 2025. The space was equipped with sensory tools, quiet zones, and tailored learning resources to create a safe and supportive environment for emotional and behavioural regulation.

Decision-making for the project involved close collaboration with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), as well as approval and support from the SENDCo and Headteacher. As project lead, I presented the rationale, objectives, and projected impact of the EMC to SLT to gain their backing. This included outlining the increasing number of behavioural incidents, risks of exclusion, and gaps in current provision. The decision to allocate staffing, budget, and space was made jointly, with oversight from school leaders.

The process of implementation involved identifying six pupils across Years 1–6 who were most at risk of exclusion or experiencing significant behavioural challenges. This was done through analysis of behavioural logs, attendance data, and existing SEND plans. Each child was given a personalised support plan, with regular one-to-one or small-group sessions led by trained teaching assistants and overseen by the SENDCo. Mainstream teachers were also involved, supporting gradual reintegration planning and collaborating on shared strategies. Weekly check-ins and ongoing data reviews allowed us to monitor progress and adapt interventions where necessary.

Data played a crucial role throughout the project: initially to identify need and prioritise the most at-risk pupils, then to establish behavioural and academic baselines, and finally to track the impact over time. This included reductions in incidents, improved engagement, and progress against individual learning and behaviour targets. Tools such as behaviour logs, attendance records, and the 'Measuring What We Value' framework supported this analysis.

Stakeholder involvement was broad: pupils, classroom teachers, the EMC team, external agencies (where applicable), and families all played a role. Reactions varied: some children responded very positively to the smaller setting and predictable routines, while others needed longer to build trust and regulate emotions. Factors such as previous trauma, parental engagement, and peer dynamics all influenced individual outcomes.

While the core plan remained intact, some flexibility was required. For example, the need for more frequent transitions back to mainstream than initially anticipated led to increased coordination with class teachers, and the scope of staff CPD had to be broadened to build capacity across the wider team.

Challenges included staffing pressures, especially in maintaining high adult-to-child ratios, and managing the complex emotional needs of pupils without access to on-site therapeutic professionals. However, the most effective elements of the plan were the structured environment, the tailored intervention plans, and the collaborative working between EMC and mainstream staff, which ensured consistency and clear expectations for pupils across both settings.

THE IMPACT OF THE EMC PROJECT

To measure the impact of the EMC project, we used a range of methods including baseline and follow-up behaviour logs, incident tracking, attendance data, and the 'Measuring What We Value' assessment tool to evaluate social and emotional progress. This multi-method approach proved effective, allowing us to monitor both quantitative improvements (e.g. reductions in fixed-term exclusions) and qualitative changes in emotional regulation and pupil engagement.

“The overarching goal was to reduce exclusions, improve emotional regulation, maintain academic engagement, and develop staff confidence in managing complex needs, all while fostering a more inclusive school culture.”



We ensured the accuracy of our findings by using triangulation – comparing data across behaviour records, staff observations, and pupil support plans – and maintaining weekly review meetings to track progress consistently. While the project did have a positive impact, particularly in reducing exclusions and improving individual pupil regulation, the rate of progress was slower than initially expected for some children. This was largely due to the depth and complexity of need, highlighting that long-term intervention is often necessary.

The most significant aspects of the project were the structured environment, the tailored support plans, and the close collaboration between the EMC team and mainstream staff, all of which ensured consistency and helped pupils generalise their success back into class settings. There has been a 73% reduction in fixed-term exclusions since the introduction of the EMC and we successfully transitioned two children into specialist settings.

The most crucial factor in achieving success was the high staff-to-pupil ratio, which enabled consistent emotional support and modelling of appropriate behaviour. The project revealed that pupils with SEMH needs can thrive when given a nurturing, individualised approach within a predictable routine, but it also made clear that systemic support, external agency input, and parental engagement are vital for sustained progress.

If we were to repeat the project, we would seek to embed additional therapeutic support (such as in-school counselling or behaviour mentoring) earlier, and we would refine transition planning back into mainstream classes to allow even smoother reintegration. Overall, our conclusions reinforce the importance of proactive, inclusive provision for pupils at risk of exclusion – not surprising, but powerfully reaffirmed by the progress made. This project has not only benefited the participating children but has begun to shift the whole-school approach to behaviour and inclusion.

OUR NEXT STEPS

Following the success and valuable learning from the EMC project, our next steps involve further embedding the EMC model into our whole-school provision and exploring how elements of the approach can be adapted and scaled across other year groups. We also intend to continue collecting data on pupil outcomes and reintegration success to inform wider SEND strategy within the school.

In terms of scaling up, the project has clearly demonstrated that offering an enhanced mainstream provision provides a vital, inclusive alternative to exclusion for children with complex SEMH needs. It supports not only academic progress but also emotional wellbeing and social development. As such, we strongly believe that this model should be considered in all schools, particularly those with high SEND populations or rising behaviour needs.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

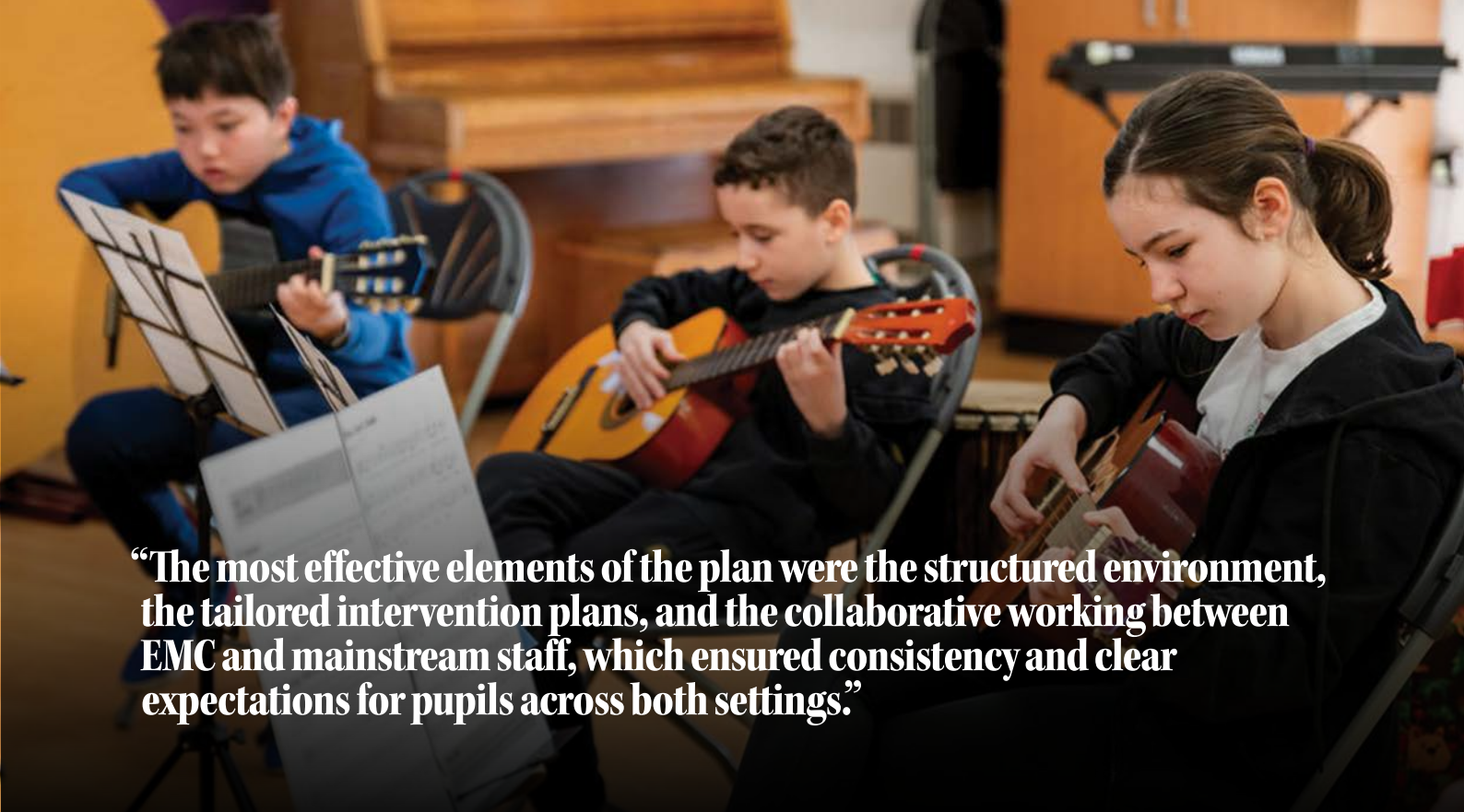
To others looking to run a similar project, we recommend starting with a clear vision, identifying high-need pupils early, and ensuring strong collaboration between SENDCos, teachers, support staff, and external agencies. High staff-to-pupil ratios, personalised plans, and structured transitions back to mainstream classrooms were essential to our success. Most importantly, it is crucial that senior leadership teams commit to the ethos of inclusive education and recognise that children with SEND require flexible, creative, and compassionate support. The EMC model is not a luxury – it is a necessary intervention that promotes equity and prevents exclusion, and with the right planning and resource investment, it is scalable and impactful in a wide range of school settings.

Rachel Edkins
EXECUTIVE HEADTEACHER & SENDCo
ASHBY FIELDS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Emma Ramm
INCLUSION AND BEHAVIOUR LEAD
ASHBY FIELDS PRIMARY SCHOOL

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“The most effective elements of the plan were the structured environment, the tailored intervention plans, and the collaborative working between EMC and mainstream staff, which ensured consistency and clear expectations for pupils across both settings.”

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Rachel and Emma have described how pupils were identified through data analysis of behaviour logs, attendance, and SEND profiles to receive targeted support. How early, and how systematically, are you able to identify children whose behaviour signals distress rather than defiance? What data sources and professional judgement inform those decisions?
- While academic learning continued, emotional regulation and trust-building were the daily focus. Could there be similar priorities in your timetable for explicitly teaching skills such as emotional literacy, co-regulation, and/or repair?
- At Ashby Fields each child had an individualised support plan with clear targets for behaviour, regulation, and reintegration. Do your support plans translate into daily, visible routines for staff and pupils? How do you ensure consistency in support and provision?
- Members of staff noted that more structured transition planning would strengthen reintegration success. Could there be similar opportunities and benefits for refining integration as a planned process with targets, timelines and celebration in your setting?

ASHBY FIELDS PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
East Midlands

400

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
EYFS - Year 6



BOYS
47%



PP
15%



SEND
14%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Ashby Fields Primary School, based in the heart of Daventry, is a thriving two-form entry primary school catering to children from EYFS through Year 6. As part of the InMat multi-academy trust, our school benefits from strong collaboration, shared resources, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Serving a diverse demographic from both the town and surrounding areas, we welcome pupils from a variety of backgrounds and work hard to ensure that every child is supported, included, and enabled to achieve their full potential.



ALDERMAN JACOBS SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS2

Supporting children at risk of permanent exclusion to ‘belong’ in their classroom

INTENT

In 2022, an SEMH Room was established in school to support children who were struggling in classrooms and demonstrating extremely difficult and often dangerous behaviour. The focus of the SEMH room was upon social and emotional development. The SEMH Room became the main space in school for six boys who, at the time, were in Years 1, 2 and 3. Despite some success in teaching the children different strategies to regulate their emotions and tailoring the provision based upon their individual Boxall Profiles, the Room became very difficult to manage as children started to copy difficult behaviours from each other and the dedicated staff leading the provision were often harmed.

From regular observations, it was clear that the lack of positive role models and calm influences around the children in the SEMH Room was not conducive to them moving forwards. As well as this, the children clearly had differing needs that needed to be met in different ways and so being in the same environment, with the same structure, they were often a trigger or catalyst for each other. We knew that we needed to devise a plan where each individual developed their own identity away from the Nurture group in order to build their self-esteem, identity and intrinsic motivation.

“We knew from the Boxall Profiles and working alongside specialist teachers that all children struggled with their self-esteem and saw core learning as a ‘threat’, so the reintegration slots were focused around more creative subjects with the clear target of ‘being included in the classroom’ as the success measure.”

Over the Summer term of the academic year 2023/24, a slow and steady reintegration back into the classroom or other relevant spaces within school was planned and supported for the five children based in the SEMH provision: this began with just ten-minute visits to their classroom for zero-demand activities such as mindfulness calming after lunch time. The aim was to build this gradually so that by the academic year 2024/25, a sessional approach was in place based around their strengths and preferences, as well as for those on part-time timetables to be in school full-time to reduce EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance). Children would ideally be a part of their classrooms 50% of the time and complete learning within their year group's curriculum as well as having regular SEMH interventions and sensory provision for regulation. They would benefit from positive role models within their classrooms as well as during their SEMH group sessions. For this model to be successful, developing a purposeful and targeted internal alternative provision offer was necessary in order to accommodate this.

AN INDIVIDUAL EXAMPLE

The change began sooner and more intensively than anticipated for one child in particular due to a panel meeting around the pupil being suspended for 15 days in a term for displaying violent and dangerous behaviours towards adults and peers. The pupil's parents mentioned that he missed 'doing maths' in his classroom and missed listening to stories being read by a teacher. We decided to begin straight away with carefully reintegrating the child back into the classroom, starting with a maths lesson every day. This then expanded to reading, science and some foundation subjects in the afternoon sessions. At certain times of the day, he would visit the Sensory Room and then, based upon the child's voice and strengths, internal alternative provision was set up in his classroom including coding on a Chromebook, tabletop sensory and fine motor activities, and access to a 'calming corner' housing a tent, cushions, soft toys etc. which he was free to access when feeling overwhelmed. There were a few expected 'wobbles' but after reviewing with staff and parents (and the resilient support of the class teacher) it was clear that this provision was helping him regulate his emotions and behaviour, learn key knowledge in maths and reading and, importantly, feel like he belonged in a classroom again. Most evidently, his 'fight or flight' response had lessened and he was able to use safer strategies when facing challenges rather than lash out physically.

IMPLEMENTATION

PLANNING AHEAD

A number of strategic and financial decisions were taken ahead of the new school year to give the project a fighting chance of success!

- A very experienced Assistant Head was seconded for one year to lead on inclusion, behaviour and the internal AP project and to re-train staff in the Cambridgeshire Therapeutic Thinking approach to behaviour and discipline.¹
- Our Pre-school Room Leader is also an accredited Forest School teacher so was asked to run Forest School provision every afternoon.
- An HLTA trained in ELSA was timetabled to provide 1:1 and small group sessions and 'drop-in' support in classrooms.
- TAs formerly based in the SEMH Room were trained to deliver art and Lego therapy sessions in addition to providing in-class support.
- A room previously used for music lessons was set up as 'The Nest' – a base for sessions to run and to operate as a safe place for children to play at lunchtime.
- The SEMH Room lead visited local schools with successful Sensory Rooms and transformed the SEMH Room into a permanent Sensory Room and, most importantly, used her knowledge of the children to create bespoke sensory profiles and activity timetables. This was crucial as we did not want the room to be used as a free-flowing soft play area nor as a place to 'send' children if they became dysregulated in the classroom.
- Security fencing between the Forest School and school gardening areas/outdoor group rooms were also removed in the summer holidays to make these spaces more accessible to children.
- In addition to 'in-house' provision, a local sports coaching company specialising in supporting children with SEMH/ poor attendance was employed to offer sessions across the week and during lunchtimes.



STAYING ADAPTABLE AND RESPONSIVE TO NEED

As the year began, we responded flexibly to what we saw during daily observations and the pupil voice of the children. We knew from the Boxall Profiles and working alongside specialist teachers that all children struggled with their self-esteem and saw core learning as a 'threat', so the reintegration slots were focused around more creative subjects with the clear target of 'being included in the classroom' as the success measure. There were no expectations of contributing verbally at this point. One child showed a longing to stay in his classroom for longer and be in close proximity to his class teacher rather than the SEMH Room adults and so his time extended more rapidly and his additional support reduced in proximity more quickly than the others. One child needed more regular check-ins and reassurance and was hypersensitive to demanding language – provision was tweaked accordingly in class as well as in terms of how the adults supported.

As each week passed, the characters and individual needs of each child became more apparent and they were involved in reviewing their timetables weekly so they felt autonomy over their time in school, but also began to understand themselves more and why each session features on their timetable – what was the purpose of it? How was it beneficial to them? Through these sessions, the children began to share their voice more readily and formed trusting, respectful relationships with the adults working with them, understanding that we were working as a team towards the same positive goal.

An unexpected discovery during the Autumn term was that half of the children actually found it difficult to be on a sessional timetable where they were experiencing transitions from one place to another. Due to this, they would often refuse to leave their classroom to go to sessions, or they would come back to class unsettled and heightened. It was necessary to relook at provision and work alongside their class teachers and TAs to develop a sessional approach, but where they remained in their classrooms most of the time.

- **In-class sessions - Chrome books, tuff tray provision, sensory**
- **Sensory Room being a trigger - individual sessions with TAs, messy play**
- **ELSA trigger - 1:1 sessions with TAs, reflective, doing something they enjoy during it**
- **Continuing sessions once the programmes had finished - e.g. Lego therapy**

This is where the approach became even more reliant on wider staff, and teachers/TAs really stepped into their own with leading sessions, understanding and leading sensory regulation, adapting in the moment and working flexibly through a therapeutic lens. The regular ongoing training in Therapeutic Thinking also gave the opportunity for staff to discuss which inclusive strategies were working well and what issues and difficulties were being encountered. Time was also allocated in fortnightly phase core group meetings to reflect and evaluate on provision and also in PPA time when planning for specific children.

“As each week passed, the characters and individual needs of each child became more apparent and they were involved in reviewing their timetables weekly so they felt autonomy over their time in school.”

IMPACT SO FAR

Impact was measured each term using pupil and staff voice, observations, work, attendance and behaviour incident logs and feedback from parents. Our school has also started to use instructional coaching and members of the leadership team used this approach to support teachers who were managing the six children in Key Stage 2.

ACADEMIC IMPACT

Improvements in engagement and access to high-quality teaching in class were evidenced through book looks, work being produced every day, assessments being completed. This has led to progress being made academically from individual starting points.

By the end of the year, four out of the six children who had previously refused to engage with core learning were participating in lessons, collaborating with peers and achieving outcomes which we would not have dared to have imagined in September!

For example, one Year 6 child began the year assessed at the PiXL B2 level* in all areas and the first time he attempted a SATs practice test in Autumn he ended up being suspended due to physical assault against an adult following major dysregulation about tests. After relentless support from his class teacher, TAs and senior leaders, he built the resilience and confidence to sit all of his end-of-year SATs, achieving expected grades in reading and grammar and narrowly missing out on achieving the same level in maths.

In Year 4, three of the children began the year working well below year group expectations in core subjects with very weak learning behaviours. After a year of experiencing increased classroom learning blended with bespoke internal alternative provision, all three children achieved the year group expectations in their PiXL maths assessments; one also achieved the expected level in reading with two children now on the cusp of being at the expected level in reading (B1/ E2).** Just as importantly, all children can manage whole lessons in a classroom without becoming dysregulated or disrupting the learning of others.

* PiXL's language of assessment includes predicted grades to help teachers and leaders be forensic about how children are currently progressing. There are two predicted grades for children working below Expected Standard: B1 indicates a key marginal pupil who, based on their current rate of progress, will not achieve Expected Standard but with the right support has the potential to do so; B2 indicates a pupil who is not expected to achieve Expected Standard in the current academic year.

** E2 refers to a pupil who, based on the current rate of progress, is likely to achieve Expected Standard but may require some additional support (as opposed to E1 pupils whose likelihood of achieving Expected Standard is considered to be secure).



“This project has reaffirmed our belief that inclusion and belonging need to be the ‘golden thread’ woven through our school values, vision and improvement priorities.”

IMPACT UPON BEHAVIOUR AND ATTENDANCE

All but one of the children saw an improvement in their attendance compared to the previous year, with one child improving from 70% to 86% (which would have been even higher had it not been for a two-week medical absence!)

Three out of the six children were able to move from intensive 1:1 support in classroom lessons to help prevent very difficult behaviour in September to being supported by the whole class TA, with 1:1 'dip-ins' as required for sensory regulation or reassurance by the end of the year.

There has been a significant reduction in physical assault against adults. Two children can still occasionally show this more aggressive behaviour but are more likely to be destructive towards objects instead. No occurrences of physical assault against adults since the Spring term have been recorded for the other four children which has meant a significant reduction in the need for physical intervention since the previous year.

Suspensions have still been issued this year when the children have seriously breached the school behaviour policy. However, three of the children have seen a significant reduction in suspensions since September. A more consistent approach to using external and internal suspension has been applied this year and, unexpectedly, have been used as a useful tool for inclusion. They have provided the opportunity to complete pupil and parental voice around the incidents, which have included setting clear targets for reintegration, using time to make necessary tweaks to provision and approaches, which has helped children to be more successful upon their return to school.

The EHCP process began for four out of the six children and by using Therapeutic Thinking analysis tools and the termly evaluations during the project, our SENDCo was able to evidence all the steps the school had taken in the APDR cycle and put forward a strong application to the Local Authority.

OTHER IMPACT SEEN

There were noticeable improvements in self-perception and social inclusion for all children. Parental voice from last year indicated that the target children often felt lonely and unwanted by their peer groups. In contrast, parents now report that talk at home is all about their friends and describing the experiences they have together in class.

Although this project primarily focused upon six children, there has been a shift in the inclusion culture across the whole school. Class teachers have embraced the changes and welcomed children with incredibly challenging behaviours back into their classrooms. Following multiple training sessions, there is far greater analysis of behaviour triggers using anxiety mapping and inclusion circles (tools from Cambridgeshire Therapeutic Thinking) and teaching and provision has been adapted to include 'SEMH-friendly' strategies. Teachers, HLTAs, TAs and senior leaders have supported and coached each other to grow resilience and provide emotional support following difficult incidents. There is also a deeper understanding of equity across the school and why certain children have access to specialist provision and opportunities, when others do not.

“By the end of the year, four out of the six children who had previously refused to engage with core learning were participating in lessons, collaborating with peers and achieving outcomes which we would not have dared to have imagined in September!”

NEXT STEPS

We knew from the outset of the project that we were looking at a minimum three-year strategy to improve our inclusive practice. Next year, our priority will be to tailor and adapt provision for children with the most significant SEMH needs in the new academic year. We will be developing in-class sensory provision across school to support those who struggle with transitions or leaving their classroom base. We will be creating different internal alternative provision opportunities that have not been available this year to keep the provision 'fresh' and teach SEMH skills in different ways. We will continue to develop and teach strategies which enable some of our most vulnerable children to self-regulate and reduce the reliance on intensive additional adult support, and in turn prepare the children to be safe, happy learners as they prepare to transition to secondary school.

Our ongoing work will now be informed by research published this year by The Difference and the Institute for Public Policy Research – ‘Who is losing learning?’² and ‘Four Tenets of Effective Internal Alternative Provision’³ as we look to develop a Tiered Inclusion Framework and adapt asset-based principles in our interactions with children and parents.

We have joined the IAP Network run by The Difference to learn from other schools and settings and will be collaborating with Trust schools and local schools to share our experiences and plans. This project has reaffirmed our belief that inclusion and belonging need to be the ‘golden thread’ woven through our school values, vision and improvement priorities.

Principles of Asset-Based Practice

Assets are a reflection of our life journeys

Assets (not deficits) help us to navigate challenge

Assets are contextual and so recognising assets requires a constructed bias-informed effort

Engaging with assets builds and strengthens relationships

Martin Fry
HEADTEACHER
 ALDERMAN JACOBS SCHOOL

Emma Vickers
ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER
 ALDERMAN JACOBS SCHOOL

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ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Martin and Emma have described how they built capacity through specialist training: engaging staff members in Therapeutic Thinking training, peer coaching, and regular reflection, building confidence to respond flexibly. Do staff in your school have similar opportunities to develop, rehearse and share effective inclusive strategies?
- Pupil voice was harnessed to drive provision, children reviewed their timetables weekly, understanding the purpose of sessions and developing ownership. Are there opportunities to involve pupils more actively in shaping their support plans in your setting, ensuring that they understand and believe in their value?
- Provision was broadened through Forest School, sports mentoring, Lego therapy, and sensory timetables – keeping engagement fresh. Could there be opportunities to develop creative low-cost or partnership-based provision that broadens SEMH support without over-relying on withdrawal provision in your school or setting?
- For Alderman Jacobs, inclusion and belonging became the ‘golden thread’ representing a shift in narrative from exclusion risk to inclusion opportunity. How visible is the principle of ‘belonging’ in your school values and daily classroom practices?

ALDERMAN JACOBS SCHOOL



REGION
 Cambridgeshire

630

NUMBER ON ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
 Reception–Year 6



BOYS
 52%



PP
 28%



SEND
 20%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Alderman Jacobs serves a socio-economically diverse community in the town of Whittlesey, Fenland. The school joined the Soke Education Trust in 2023 having previously been a standalone Academy for a number of years. A new headteacher joined the school in January 2024.



CORNERSTONE SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

The Haven: supporting Emotionally Based School Avoidance within a Specialist Provision

CONTEXT

Students at our school face a combination of complex needs, including autism, high anxiety, and a history of negative educational experiences. Many were previously undiagnosed or in settings unable to meet their needs. This context places all of our students at heightened risk of school avoidance, more formally identified as Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

Traditionally, our focus mirrored that of many schools: supporting students with entrenched EBSA who were unable to attend school at all. However, interventions at this late stage often yielded limited success. This project shifted attention towards students showing early signs of school avoidance - those not yet fully absent, but at risk of becoming disengaged. By intervening at this point, the aim was to prevent escalation and to sustain positive connections with school.

INTENT

The purpose of this project was to create a bridge between home and the classroom: a safe, low-demand environment where students could retain some control, continue to access learning, and gradually reintegrate into mainstream classes.

The project involved establishing a dedicated EBSA base, later named The Haven. Initially, three students were selected, supported by two members of staff. Selection criteria focused on those who, despite current challenges, could attend school with adjustments. The overarching goal was always reintegration, though at a pace appropriate to each student, with recognition given to every milestone - even a brief 10-minute presence in The Haven. Staff received training through the local authority educational psychology team as part of the Bexley EBSA pilot project, ensuring that the approach was grounded in current research and best practice. Parents and carers were engaged from the outset, strengthening home-school collaboration.

IMPLEMENTATION

Following discussions with the Senior Leadership Team and the school's EBSA lead, we identified space that could be repurposed as our EBSA base. Students involved were consulted on its layout and resources, giving them ownership and ensuring that the space felt distinct from a classroom environment. The Haven became a formal strand within EBSA identification and planning. Attendance data, EBSA Toolkit evidence, and staff observations informed both baseline assessment and ongoing monitoring.

PROVISION INCLUDED:

- Flexible timetabling, enabling students to access The Haven during times of heightened anxiety or subject-specific triggers.
- Introduction of ASDAN short courses, providing accredited, interest-led learning that could build confidence and skills while reducing barriers to re-engagement.
- Whole-staff training, ensuring consistency in approach across teaching, administrative, and premises staff.

Challenges included staffing constraints and balancing the needs of The Haven alongside wider school provision. Nevertheless, the most significant success was in reaching students before complete disengagement, ensuring they retained a sense of belonging.

IMPACT

Impact was primarily measured through case studies, supplemented by attendance figures and evidence of progress against EBSA Toolkit plans.

KEY FINDINGS INCLUDED:

- **Improved attendance and engagement:** several students who had been close to full disengagement were attending school regularly, albeit via The Haven as a transitional base
- **Increased confidence:** small milestones, such as participating in a short learning activity or spending a set time in a mainstream lesson, were achieved and celebrated
- **Parental confidence:** parents and carers reported greater reassurance that their children were being supported in a tailored and sensitive way
- **Staff reflection:** the project highlighted the need to address EBSA proactively, with staff recognising the value of flexible approaches

Although numbers were small, outcomes demonstrated that early intervention is more effective than attempting to re-engage students once patterns of absence are entrenched. The introduction of ASDAN short courses proved particularly valuable, enabling students to achieve recognised outcomes that bridged back into more formal learning.

“The most significant success was in reaching students before complete disengagement, ensuring they retained a sense of belonging.”



NEXT STEPS

Building on these outcomes, the next phase will involve:

- Developing individual pathway plans, integrating EBSA Toolkit strategies with courses and activities linked to each student's interests, with gradual reintegration into mainstream lessons.
- Making The Haven increasingly student-led, with young people shaping the environment and contributing to its development.
- Strengthening work with the wider specialist team, including occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and educational psychology, to address specific barriers to school.
- Exploring new strategies to support students with entrenched EBSA who have not yet accessed The Haven.

Scaling up will focus not on increasing numbers but on diversifying the offer – expanding accredited courses, enhancing documentation to track progress, and embedding EBSA-informed practices throughout the school.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHERS:

- Train all staff – every adult in school may encounter EBSA students, and understanding is vital
- Start small and build gradually
- Ensure the space feels unlike a classroom
- Select the right staff to lead the work; empathy and a deep understanding of EBSA are essential
- Accept that progress will vary – persistence is key
- Be clear that The Haven (or whatever name you choose!) is not an isolation space, but a proactive, supportive intervention

As the project demonstrates, EBSA support must be prioritised above all else: EBSA trumps all.

Debbie Donnelly

PRINCIPAL

CORNERSTONE SCHOOL

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Jones, K. (2021) **William & Leahy's Five Formative Assessment Strategies in Action**. Woodbridge: John Catt Educational Ltd.

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Cornerstone moved its focus from responding to entrenched absence to proactively supporting students showing early signs of EBSA - early identification became a protective factor. How is early identification managed in your setting, could attendance patterns, staff observations, or pupil voice be helpful for spotting early warning signs of anxiety-driven disengagement before absence takes hold?
- Students co-designed the layout and atmosphere of The Haven, ensuring it felt distinct from typical classrooms. This ownership helped rebuild trust in the school environment. In what ways could pupils co-create or influence the learning spaces intended to support their wellbeing and engagement in your setting?
- ASDAN short courses gave structure and credibility to learning, allowing students to achieve tangible success while rebuilding academic confidence. How might short, interest-led or accredited learning pathways support pupils to experience early success and rebuild trust in education?
- Collaboration with educational psychologists, therapists, and other professionals ensured that strategies met both emotional and learning needs. How effectively do your school systems connect therapeutic advice with classroom practice, ensuring that emotional and educational plans work hand in hand?



“Outcomes demonstrated that early intervention is more effective than attempting to re-engage students once patterns of absence are entrenched.”

CORNERSTONE SCHOOL



REGION
Bexley

112

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7 - Year 11



BOYS
64%



PP
43%



SEND
100%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION We are a SEN secondary school. We are part of Trinitas Academy Trust, which consists of ourselves, a mainstream secondary school and five mainstream primary schools. All of our students have an EHCP, primary diagnosis of autism, related SEMH and are working at or around age related expectations.



MAY PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Rethinking inclusion: a person-centred approach to meeting learners' complex needs

OUR CONTEXT

May Park Primary School is a two- to three-form entry inner-city primary with a significantly higher than average proportion of pupils with SEND (20.74%). In response to increasing demand for specialist provision across the city, we worked with the local authority to open a specialist resourced provision (SRP) for pupils with autism and/or speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The SRP, known within our school community as The Base, opened in February 2023, and comprises of three classrooms supporting up to eight pupils each from Year 1 to Year 6. Our primary aim in opening The Base was to meet the growing needs within our community, subsequently creating more SRP spaces across the city.

THE PURPOSE OF OUR PROJECT

Following our most recent Ofsted inspection, inspectors questioned why pupils in The Base were not accessing the level of mainstream inclusion outlined in the Department for Education's guidance, which states that pupils in SRPs should *"spend most of their time (usually well over 50% of their timetable) in mainstream classes."*¹ Our response highlighted the complexity of need presented by our cohort. Many pupils are pre-verbal, highly sensory-seeking or have both learning and emotional needs, meaning a time-based approach to inclusion would not be suitable and could actually have a negative impact on their wellbeing and readiness to learn.

Inclusion as a concept, and what 'real' inclusion looks like, has long been a hot topic of discussion. In his book *Addressing tensions and dilemmas in inclusive education*, Brahm Norwich highlights the challenges of balancing pupils' entitlement to mainstream provision, with their individual need.² We therefore aimed to establish a meaningful, person-centred model of inclusion, developed with each pupil's needs and progress rather than fixed timeframes. We placed a strong emphasis on supporting development within the four areas of need outlined in the SEND Code of Practice³, with a particular focus on EHCP targets linked to communication, interaction and emotional regulation. Our goals included aligning inclusion opportunities with individual EHCP outcomes, building staff confidence in supporting pupils with complex needs across both The Base and mainstream, and developing a flexible, sustainable model of inclusion that prioritised quality over quantity.

The project was implemented across the full cohort in The Base, supported by the SRP staff team and colleagues in the mainstream classes who were also involved. The only criterion for participation was that we could create an inclusion plan focused on individual need, pupil readiness and the potential for meaningful engagement in the wider school setting.

WHAT WE DID

The project was delivered in phases, led by teaching staff in The Base alongside mainstream teachers, support staff and the Assistant Vice Principal (also the school's SENDCo). Teachers used a combination of formative assessments, teacher observations and B-Squared's Connecting Steps data tracker to identify which pupils had the foundational communication, regulation and interaction skills needed for structured inclusion. For others, it was clear that targeted development needed to take place before inclusion could be beneficial.

For those ready to access inclusion meaningfully, teachers from The Base and linked mainstream classes developed personalised inclusion plans. These plans were built around SMART targets, aligned with each pupil's EHCP, and focused on specific areas such as social communication, emotional regulation, and interaction. Pupils were then baselined in these areas using Connecting Steps, providing a clear starting point to measure impact.

Inclusion was introduced gradually through a phased model. Pupils were linked to a mainstream class that was often, but not always, within their chronological aged year group, and began with low-pressure, short visits supported by a familiar adult. These progressed to longer, structured sessions based on the pupil's level of engagement and comfort. Activities were selected based on their potential to support key targets. For example, forest school sessions allowed for turn-taking and shared attention, PE supported group participation and instruction-following, while break times offered opportunities for social communication and interaction with peers.

While this work progressed with the initial group, staff also explored peer inclusion within The Base. For pupils not yet ready for mainstream environments, opportunities were provided to interact with other Base classes. One pupil began eating lunch with a different Base class before extending his inclusion time to also include their library sessions. Another started by accessing morning carousel learning in a different Base classroom twice a week, eventually joining daily. This approach respected each pupil's developmental stage while still embedding the principle of inclusion.

Recognising inclusion as a reciprocal process, we also offered opportunities for mainstream pupils to access learning within The Base. Some joined for playtimes, regulation breaks, swimming sessions or specific core learning activities. These experiences proved valuable for mainstream pupils who benefitted from smaller, low-arousal environments, and also helped challenge misconceptions around SEND. Throughout implementation, planning and review were collaborative. Regular discussions between The Base and mainstream teams ensured inclusion sessions remained purposeful and focused on developing the pupils' outcomes outlined in their inclusion plans. Information gathered via Connecting Steps and observational data informed ongoing decisions.

Some adjustments were necessary. The initial assumption that pupils would link to their chronological year group proved too rigid, and several pupils made more progress when placed with older or younger peer groups. Additionally, our original aim of increasing staff confidence across the mainstream setting proved harder to achieve. While some teachers grew in confidence through joint planning, further bespoke training was required for some teaching and support staff members. However, due to time constraints, this could not be delivered at scale, and most sessions continued to rely on support from familiar adults in The Base. Despite this, the most effective aspect of implementation was the flexibility of the model. Inclusion was not fixed or time-bound. By focusing on readiness, emotional regulation and meaningful engagement, inclusion became something that evolved with the child rather than being imposed upon them.



IMPACT

We tracked pupil progress through B-Squared Connecting Steps in the specific areas targeted within pupils' inclusion plans, most commonly communication and interaction, emotional regulation, and social communication. This data was complemented by teacher observations and informal pupil voice tools (e.g. visual check-ins), and review discussions with staff. The data captured small but significant steps of progress, which might have been missed using broader academic measures. The use of Connecting Steps allowed for close tracking of movement against EHCP outcomes, while staff observations helped contextualise that progress within real-life classroom and playground experiences. This combination provided a consistent and accurate picture across settings.

Overall, the project has had a strong impact so far. Pupils are developing key skills and continuing to increase their time in inclusive environments, whether in mainstream classes, across different Base classrooms or through reciprocal inclusion with mainstream peers. The development of individual inclusion plans, phased transitions and carefully targeted opportunities were particularly successful in building engagement and independence. One area that did not progress as planned was the upskilling of mainstream support staff. While some of the class teachers benefitted from the collaborative planning process, the more extensive training needed to build true confidence among support staff was not possible within existing timeframes. This remains an area for future development.

Importantly, the project demonstrated the value of a flexible, person-centred model of inclusion. By removing time-based targets and focusing on readiness, communication and emotional regulation, we were able to create experiences that were meaningful and motivating for pupils. Furthermore, allowing mainstream pupils to access The Base helped shift staff and pupil perceptions of inclusion as something reciprocal and values-driven. The findings confirmed that inclusion is most effective when it adapts to the child, rather than requiring the child to adapt to a rigid model. This reflects Black-Hawkins' emphasis on developing inclusive practice through responsiveness and collaboration with pupils' individual needs.⁴

NEXT STEPS

Looking ahead, our next steps will focus on strengthening staff capacity across the wider school, with particular attention to mainstream support staff. We plan to provide a coaching buddy system whereby mainstream support staff are teamed up with a member of Base support staff. We aim to provide dedicated time for staff to carry out peer observations and discuss effective strategies in supporting pupils with a wide variety of complex needs. This should not only enhance the support given for Base pupils during their inclusion time, but it will also strengthen the overall support provided within the mainstream classrooms for all learners. In parallel, we will develop a more formalised approach to capturing pupil voice, including non-verbal feedback systems. We also hope to scale up the principles of this project by applying our person-centred inclusion model to a broader group of pupils with SEND in mainstream. Additionally, we are exploring ways to share our practice with other schools across our Academy Trust who are developing or embedding SRPs, offering peer support or outreach where appropriate.

For schools considering similar projects, we recommend starting with a clear, shared vision of what inclusion means in your setting. Plan collaboratively, work from the individual pupil's strengths and needs, and remain open to change. As highlighted by Florian and Black-Hawkins, teaching is designed to accommodate all learners without labelling or separating pupils.⁵ True inclusion is not static but grows with the pupil and is sustained through trusting relationships, purposeful planning, and a shared belief that every child deserves to belong.

Stacey-Louise O'Hagan

ASSISTANT SENDCo & RESOURCE BASE LEAD
MAY PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL

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- ⁴ Black-Hawkins, K. (2010). **Developing Inclusive Classroom Practices**. British Journal of Special Education.
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“Inclusion as a concept, and what ‘real’ inclusion looks like, has long been a hot topic of discussion.”



ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Stacey-Louise has described how mainstream peers accessed The Base for play, regulation breaks or joint activities to create reciprocal inclusion opportunities at May Park Primary. Could there be similar benefits in your school or setting for creating opportunities for mainstream pupils to learn alongside SEND peers in ways that build empathy and challenge misconceptions?
- The school has prioritised quality over quantity in inclusion. Rather than focusing on 50%+ time ‘in class’, inclusion was quantified by readiness, wellbeing, and meaningful engagement. How do you measure inclusion in your school – by minutes spent in class, or by the depth and value of each experience?
- Using Connecting Steps, observational notes and pupil voice (including non-verbal methods) allowed staff to track small but significant gains and capture small steps of progress. How might you capture and celebrate ‘hidden’ progress in communication, regulation, or interaction that academic data alone might miss?

MAY PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
Bristol

479

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Reception-Year 6



BOYS
52%



PP
30.8%



SEND
23.7%



ST LEONARD'S CE PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: EYFS-KS1

Our journey to an enhanced pathway

OUR SCHOOL CONTEXT

Our school serves a diverse and evolving community of 338 pupils from Nursery to Year 6. We have one Nursery class, two Reception classes and three mixed-age classes for Years 1/2, 3/4 and 5/6, alongside our Enhanced Pathway (EP) SEND provision. We sit in deprivation quintile 4 nationally, and pupil stability is below the national average at 76%. Around 26% of pupils are eligible for the Pupil Premium Grant, and many families continue to experience the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis. This has driven a strengthened pastoral focus and closer collaboration with families to ensure pupils are emotionally supported and ready to learn.

The proportion of pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) has risen to 60%, almost three times the national average (23.4%), with 30 languages spoken across the community. Urdu (14.79%) is the most common language after English. This cultural and linguistic diversity enriches our school's ethos of promoting global awareness and mutual respect, while also presenting communication challenges that demand creativity and flexibility.

SEND numbers are broadly in line with national averages, but the complexity of need has increased significantly. The number of pupils with EHCPs has risen from 10 to 17 (2024-2025), with a concentration of high-level needs within a single year group. The development of our Enhanced Pathway (known as Sparrow's Nest) has enabled pupils with complex communication and interaction needs to access education safely and meaningfully.

INTENT

WHERE OUR JOURNEY BEGAN

In our 2023 Reception cohort, a number of children had high-level SEND needs, primarily within communication and interaction. Of these, five had EHCPs, two had EHCNAs in progress, and two were attending on reintegration timetables of one hour per day. We initially created a dedicated SEND class adjacent to the mainstream Reception class to provide a quieter, tailored environment while still allowing some integration. The success of this arrangement led us to apply for Enhanced Pathway status, which was approved for the 2024–2025 academic year.

BECOMING AN ENHANCED PATHWAY

Our Enhanced Pathway (EP) was established for KS1 pupils with a Communication and Interaction (C&I) and Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) focus. In 2024–2025, nine pupils attended:

- Eight boys and one girl
- Eight with EHCPs, one with an EHCNA pending
- Seven Year 1s, two Year 2s (one chronologically Year 3)
- Eight with ASD diagnoses
- Four non-verbal, two pre-verbal (gestalt language speakers), three verbal using short phrases
- Seven pupils came from our 2023 Reception cohort, one transferred from an unsuccessful mainstream placement, and one joined in November 2024 with no prior school experience.

The team consisted of a Class Teacher (0.4 FTE) working alongside the SENDCo, an HLTA (0.6 FTE) leading the class on other days, and two or more Teaching Assistants, maintaining a minimum of four adults in the room at all times. All pupils were working significantly below age-related expectations (ARE). By the end of the year, two pupils were ready to access half-day mainstream sessions, with two others taking part in regular playtime integration.

SELECTING PUPILS FOR THE PATHWAY

As this was our first year, entry criteria were informal. The following questions guided suitability:

1. **Does the child have a C&I need?**
2. **Can they access learning in a mainstream classroom?**
3. **How far below ARE are they working?**
4. **Do they have (or need) an EHCP?**

Pupils suited the EP if they had significant C&I needs, minimal mainstream access, were 2+ years below ARE, and had or required an EHCP.

PLANNING AND CURRICULUM DESIGN

The SENDCo and Class Teacher co-designed a bespoke daily routine inspired by EYFS pedagogy with a 'stage not age' approach. The structure included three daily group sessions, continuous provision, and 1:1 interventions aligned with each pupil's EHCP or SEND profile. Topics mirrored those of KS1 peers to promote shared experiences and potential integration points. Monitoring was conducted internally by leadership and externally through the Enhanced Pathway Programme's quality assurance visits.

IMPLEMENTATION

SETTING UP THE EP

A dedicated, accessible building on site was repurposed for the EP, providing:

- A large open-plan classroom
- Secure outdoor learning area
- An additional teaching room
- Dedicated kitchen and toilet facilities, including disabled access

Though physically separate from the mainstream, the space offered safety, flexibility and sensory regulation opportunities essential for this cohort. Resources were sourced through reallocation, Sports Premium funding (£3,000), and a grant from the Opening Schools' Facilities Fund, which provided sensory circuit and physical development equipment.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF OUR EP

Consistency and predictability were fundamental. A typical day included:

- Soft landing (8:40–9:00) – free play to settle
- Phonics (9:10–9:25)
- Continuous provision and interventions
- Attention Autism and sensory sessions
- Maths and afternoon continuous provision
- Transition songs marking every change of activity

The use of songs and routines fostered security and independence. Over the year, behaviour and engagement improved dramatically. Pupils who had previously struggled with regulation began participating safely in shared activities. Integration expanded to playtimes, assemblies, circle time and visits, with four pupils regularly attending by spring.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND MONITORING

The Enhanced Pathway's development was supported by a broad professional network including parents, school staff (the SENDCo, EP staff, Headteacher, Home-School Linked Worker) and local external specialists (Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy professionals, as well as colleagues from the Oxfordshire Schools Inclusion Team (OXSiT), Special Educational Needs Support Service (SENSS), and the Behaviour and Inclusion Officers (BIO team)).

Regular meetings, reviews and parent feedback ensured triangulated evaluation of pupil progress and wellbeing. Progress was tracked using the Oxfordshire Developmental Journal (ODJ) and EHCP targets, RAG-rated weekly and reviewed termly. A formal EP Data Tracker recorded attendance, attainment and levels of support, providing an evidence base for evaluation and future planning. This structured approach also enhanced collaboration with therapists and external professionals, who used the data to tailor interventions and offer staff CPD on specialist strategies.

CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

1. Physical separation from the main building limited informal interaction but was offset by structured integration sessions.
2. Staffing and cover were challenging due to the need for consistency and familiarity for pupils with C&I needs. Building staff confidence and resilience became a priority.
3. Funding limitations required creative resource management. Additional funding was successfully secured for 2025–2026 after demonstrating impact.

IMPACT

KEY OUTCOMES

After one academic year, the Enhanced Pathway achieved substantial progress across attendance, engagement and outcomes:

- **Attendance and time in school:**
Of the three pupils on 1-hour timetables at the start of the project, two now attend school fulltime (25+ hours) with only one remaining on the reduced timetable.
- **EHCP target progress:**
Fully met targets increased from 17.6% (Autumn) to 43.4% (Summer). Five pupils met or partially met all targets.
- **Behaviour and regulation:**
No exclusions. Team Teach incidents drastically reduced from 24 (2023–2024) to 8 (2024–2025).
- **Communication and interaction:**
All pupils now use some form of consistent communication—verbal, gesture, or aided.
- **Inclusion:**
No pupil required alternative provision; several now integrate regularly with mainstream peers.

QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE

Termly submissions to the Enhanced Pathway Programme, combined with internal RAG ratings and ODJs, confirm sustained improvement across learning, communication, attendance and behaviour. The triangulated data (school, professional and parental) provides robust validation of impact.

PARENT TESTIMONIALS

Parents' voices have been central to evaluating success. Their reflections highlight the emotional and academic impact of the provision:

"Before the nest, my son would struggle attending school and coping in a school environment, but with this classroom he attends 5 days a week and is so happy to be there. It makes me so happy to see the progress he has made and continues to make. He has gone from trying to escape a 'normal' classroom in reception, to staying in the nest the whole time he is in school. As soon as he arrives, he runs straight to the gate and can't wait to be in class. He enjoys exploring and running around the massive space, he particularly loves the outdoor space and swing! The care and support offered by all staff is outstanding. They know exactly what they're doing and how to keep the children safe and happy! We love the nest, and so does our son."

"Today, the difference [Sparrow's Nest] has made to his development is very amazing and very big. My son no more spits, bites, kicks or hits the children and teachers to express himself when he is angry. He can express himself the way you will understand him, if he does something wrong, he accepts his fault and goes to time out. Now, my son goes to school five hours and 15 mins, from one or two hours in class to five hours and 15 mins each day in Year 1, which shows that there is a big impact. I am much grateful for the support of the teachers and government funding to Sparrow's Nest."

"Sparrow's Nest provides a safe, secure, familiar setting which is vital to keep ASD children safe. [...] All the equipment has been well considered to ensure that even fun times are a learning opportunity."

"Our daughter is non-verbal and shows severe autism symptoms. [...] Over the past year we have noticed that she now interacts with us and others much more and gives more eye contact (from almost zero a year ago). The school has been very successfully working on this following the speech and language program of "May I Join You" which we also follow at home. She is very comfortable with all the staff in the school, and we can see that they show great interest in all the children. We particularly like the feedback we get every time we pick her up regarding her day and the photos they regularly post showing all the activities that she is doing at school."

"As parents, we are profoundly grateful for the exceptional care and dedication shown by the teachers and staff at Sparrow's Nest. Our son had never been to school before and due to his severe learning difficulties, he faced serious challenges on his development. The school's inclusive approach and tailored support have been transformative for him. All the teachers have gone above and beyond to understand his needs (sometimes unique) creating a patient environment where he feels safe and valued. His confidence and social skills have also flourished (compared to his normal routine)."

These testimonies reflect families' gratitude and provide qualitative evidence of the EP's impact on pupils' emotional security, communication and engagement. In addition, a Specialist Advisory Teacher commented: "Children attending Sparrow's Nest are all making progress in their communication and interaction, some of which is generalised in the home setting too. Staff are dedicated, motivated to do the best for the children who attend – and a joy to work with."

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1 – Rebuilding trust and engagement Pupil A began the year on a one-hour reintegration timetable, displaying unsafe and physical behaviours. Through consistent routines, close multi-agency support and nurture within the EP, the pupil now attends full time (25+ hours) and integrates daily at playtimes. EHCP progress rose from 20% met to 69% met by year-end.

Case Study 2 – Towards mainstream inclusion Pupils B and C, initially unable to access mainstream safely, are now successfully integrating. Pupil B, academically strong but with emotional regulation needs, will attend mornings in mainstream and afternoons in the EP from September. Pupil C, whose social skills have flourished, will attend mornings in the EP and afternoons in mainstream. Both now engage safely and follow routines.

Case Study 3 – Developing communication Pupil D, previously non-verbal and disengaged, began responding to their name and initiating interaction through non-verbal communication. Using 'May I Join You' and Total Communication approaches, they can now request songs and activities both at school and home, showing generalised progress across settings.



REFLECTIONS AND LEARNING

Our first year has exceeded expectations. We anticipated progress and engagement; instead, we witnessed transformational change—children once unable to access education now attending happily, learning and communicating.

REFLECTING ON THE JOURNEY, FIVE KEY LESSONS STAND OUT:

1. **True inclusion requires bespoke environments.** The EP has enabled pupils with high-level needs to access learning safely and meaningfully within a school community, avoiding isolation or exclusion.
2. **A stage-not-age approach promotes independence.** Purpose-built spaces remove barriers to autonomy and reduce dependence on 1:1 support.
3. **Staff development and shared practice strengthen provision school-wide.** Observations and collaboration between EP and mainstream teachers have enhanced understanding of SEND strategies across all classrooms.
4. **Consistency and patience are transformative.** Predictable routines and trusted relationships underpin success for our most vulnerable learners.
5. **Collaboration and shared expertise multiply impact.** External professionals and local partnerships have provided knowledge, validation and sustainability for ongoing development.

BUDGETING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Funding remains a challenge, as Enhanced Pathway allocations do not fully meet operational costs. However, proactive engagement with the county team secured increased funding for 2025–2026. Sharing practice and pooling resources with local schools has also proved invaluable.

NEXT STEPS

For 2025–2026, the EP will:

- Expand to include 11 pupils (10 on site at a time due to integration timetables).
- Redesign the environment to include two distinct spaces—one for continuous provision and another low-distraction area for focused learning, following successful local models.
- Integrate two Reception pupils, ensuring developmental rather than chronological grouping.
- Embed visual communication strategies across all classrooms, building on expertise gained from C&I and SLT teams.
- Develop staff confidence in supporting complex needs through peer coaching, shared planning and external CPD.

SEND provision in mainstream has already improved through shared approaches such as our total approach to communication and language, and consistent use of visual supports. The next phase focuses on sustaining this impact school-wide and ensuring every learner—regardless of need—can access education that is meaningful, motivating and inclusive.

FINAL REFLECTION

The Enhanced Pathway has become far more than a provision—it is a philosophy of inclusion. It has demonstrated that when structure, empathy and collaboration meet, even the most complex learners can thrive.

As one parent reflected:

“Before Sparrow’s Nest, my child couldn’t cope in school. Now, they run to the gate each morning, smiling. That joy says everything.”

Hannah Mansfield
SENDCo
ST. LEONARD’S CE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Caroline Debus
HEADTEACHER
ST. LEONARD’S CE PRIMARY SCHOOL



“Our first year has exceeded expectations. We anticipated progress and engagement; instead, we witnessed transformational change.”

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- St Leonard’s CE designed the Enhanced Pathway around a clear intent: to provide a safe, bespoke, and inclusive route for pupils with complex Communication and Interaction needs. What would be the core purpose of a similar pathway in your school or setting – and how could you ensure it complements, rather than replaces, inclusion within mainstream classrooms?
- Learning followed a ‘stage not age’ approach, using an EYFS-style structure, consistent routines, and predictable transitions. To what extent does your current timetable reflect the developmental rather than chronological needs of pupils with SEND—and how might greater predictability support them to feel safe and ready to learn?
- Clear questions guided decisions about who would benefit from the provision and how integration with mainstream could be built in. How do you currently decide when a pupil should access smaller-group or specialist provision—and how do you plan for reintegration when pupils are ready?

ST LEONARDS’S CE PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
South East

338

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Nursery–Year 6



BOYS
51.8%



PP
26.1%



SEND
20.1%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

In recent years, a decline in birth rates has led to a reduction in pupil numbers. Combined with unfunded pay increases and rising energy costs, this has placed additional pressure on our school’s finances, which were already in deficit. As a result, we reduced our Published Admission Number (PAN) to 45 from September 2023 and restructured our staffing model to ensure long-term sustainability. This included the introduction of vertically grouped classes from Key Stage 1 onwards. Following these actions and careful financial planning, we have eliminated our deficit and are now operating with a projected surplus for the next three years.



WELLINGTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Step by step: journeys, not judgements

INTENT

The Ark Project was established in response to the increasingly complex sensory and communication needs of pupils at Wellington Primary School. Originating in 2018, it began in a decommissioned mobile classroom repurposed for Occupational Therapy (OT) sessions and as a quiet lunch space – a sanctuary for sensory integration and emotional regulation. Over time, this modest start evolved into a fully equipped sensory environment with innovative school-designed features, including a repurposed dark cupboard as a sensory room. Initially, support was limited – one OT visit every two weeks and two Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) sessions per week. Today, SALT input has grown to 4.5 days per week and OT support twice weekly, reflecting the expanding scale and impact of the provision. The Ark now comprises two bespoke small-group settings, each supporting up to ten pupils, all either diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or undergoing assessment. Around 80% are non-speaking or minimally speaking, requiring structured, visual approaches rooted in the TEACCH¹ approach.

While inclusive workstation systems had long been in place, it became clear that a more targeted and integrated model was needed. The Ark was created to embed therapy targets within everyday learning – replacing isolated withdrawal sessions with continuous, personalised support. Every small step forward – however incremental – is intentionally planned, recognised, and celebrated. The project ensures that sensory regulation and communication development are woven into the fabric of daily routines, promoting engagement, independence, emotional regulation, and communication. Crucially, the Ark recognises that even the smallest milestones – a shared glance or a tolerated texture – represent profound progress and the foundation for future growth.

“Every small step forward—however incremental—is intentionally planned, recognised, and celebrated.”

PROVISION STRUCTURE AND DAILY PRACTICE

From Autumn 2024, the Ark expanded into two dedicated rooms supporting pupils in EYFS and KS1, plus one Year 5 pupil requiring alternative provision. Each setting follows a highly personalised approach based on individual sensory profiles and communication systems. Fifteen children and a team of six staff – teachers, TAs, SALT, and OT – work collaboratively under the Deputy Headteacher and SENDCo, who oversee both academic and developmental progress.

Provision is structured around:

- Personalised sensory diets for sensory regulation and engagement
- Communication scaffolds (Widgit symbols, core vocabulary boards, AAC systems)
- Therapy-informed activities integrating therapeutic and academic goals

Each pupil has a co-developed sensory and communication profile, informing planning and daily interaction.

Core principles include:

- Clear, individual targets co-developed with SALT and OT
- Integration of therapy goals into classroom visuals and routines
- Progress is tracked through observations, photos and (from Spring 2025) PIVATS²
- Weekly “Floor Books” documenting mini milestones
- Activities promoting regulation, communication, and interaction
- Weekly reflective meetings to adapt strategies

PLANNING AND PROGRESSION

Each child begins with a baseline profile developed collaboratively through a multi-agency process. Activities support skills such as requesting, rejecting, transitioning, and tolerating.

A typical day includes:

- Structured mornings (sensory circuits, “first/then” boards)
- Focused mid-morning tasks (intensive interaction, object-based communication)
- Afternoon thematic sessions (music, messy play, outdoor learning)

Weekly staff reflections ensure responsive planning, and all achievements – large or small – are shared with families under the ethos: ‘Small Steps – Journeys, Not Judgements’.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: BUILDING A TAILORED, THERAPY-INFORMED PROVISION

GRADUAL, CHILD-CENTRED IMPLEMENTATION

The Ark launched gradually to ensure consistency and reduce anxiety. Each pupil’s EHCP targets, therapy reports, and observations informed personalised learning profiles capturing sensory preferences, communication strengths, and regulation strategies—the foundation of each “small steps” plan. Target-based micro-routines (e.g. visual prompts for communication, deep pressure before transitions) were embedded within familiar TEACCH structures to maximise therapeutic impact.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

The Deputy Headteacher and SENDCo worked with SLT to align the project with school priorities. A formal proposal—emphasising a therapy-integrated approach—was unanimously supported. Staffing, resources, and monitoring decisions were taken collaboratively, ensuring the model remained inclusive, sustainable, and child-focused.



PHASED ROLLOUT AND COLLABORATION

- **Phase 1:** Baseline assessment and small-step target setting (e.g. 'Tolerate 5 minutes of messy play')
- **Phase 2:** Embedding targets into natural routines and documenting progress weekly
- **Ongoing:** Regular SALT/OT reflection meetings and family engagement through weekly updates and Floor Book reviews

Parental feedback was overwhelmingly positive, reinforcing motivation and morale across the team.

USE OF DATA TO DRIVE PRACTICE

Data informed every stage:

- **Identifying need:** Analysis of EHCPs and therapy reports
- **Establishing baselines:** Observational checklists of sensory and communication responses
- **Measuring impact:** Floor Books, photos, and PIVATS tracking

Each success—no matter how small—was celebrated; for example, a child initiating a choice card or following a toilet routine independently.

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT AND RESPONSES

The project engaged teachers, TAs, SALT, OT, and SLT. Pupils responded positively to familiar structures and individualised pacing. EYFS and KS1 pupils made rapid progress; the Year 5 pupil progressed more slowly but showed strong gains in regulation and interaction. Staff engagement was high, though newer members initially found the observation and documentation demands challenging. Ongoing reflective practice built confidence and consistency.

CHALLENGES

As with any project, we had to adapt to some challenges that arose:

- Staff absence affecting routines
- Balancing data collection with interaction
- Some targets needing refinement into smaller, measurable steps

Flexibility became a key principle: "The room fits the child, not the other way around."

WHAT WORKED BEST

- Embedding targets into daily routines
- Strong multidisciplinary collaboration
- Celebrating progress through Floor Books and displays
- Built-in flexibility and reflection ensuring child-centred practice

“Pupils responded positively to familiar structures and individualised pacing. EYFS and KS1 pupils made rapid progress; the Year 5 pupil progressed more slowly but showed strong gains in regulation and interaction.”

MEASURING IMPACT

Impact was tracked using:

- PIVATS small-step targets
- Daily logs and photographic evidence
- Parental and professional feedback

This multi-method approach captured nuanced progress, such as regulation in new situations or spontaneous eye contact. Accuracy was ensured through triangulated evidence—cross-professional observations, baseline comparisons and parental validation. Families often reported parallel improvements at home.

WAS THE PROJECT IMPACTFUL?

Yes. Most pupils showed sustained improvement in:

- Regulation and emotional resilience
- Communicative intent and AAC use
- Engagement in structured routines

One previously avoidant child now tolerates shared play and uses visuals to initiate requests. While generalisation to less structured settings remains a goal, foundational progress has been significant.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

Personalisation: Provision tailored to each pupil's sensory, emotional, and communication profile.

Embedded Therapy: Strategies integrated into daily teaching, not isolated sessions.

Celebrating small wins: Reframing "success" as every meaningful step forward—motivating both staff and families.

Collaboration: Continuous partnership with SALT and OT ensured strategies remained relevant.

Consistency: Shared understanding and predictable structures created stability.

Reflective practice: Weekly reviews sustained responsiveness and supported professional growth.

KEY INSIGHTS

The Ark revealed that when sensory and emotional needs are met, pupils demonstrate remarkable potential for communication, engagement, and independence. It also highlighted that standard academic measures often fail to capture this progress—development in regulation and intentional communication must be recognised as equally vital learning outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

- **Simplify data collection:** A shared digital log for real-time milestone tracking
- **Strengthen home-school collaboration:** More workshops and take-home visual resources to support skill generalisation

Both would streamline processes and extend impact beyond school.

CONCLUSIONS AND UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

Embedding purposeful, small-step targets within daily routines fosters sustained and authentic progress. What appears modest—a symbol chosen, a new texture tolerated—often signals profound developmental change. A key outcome has been a shift in staff mindset – small steps are now recognised as powerful, not peripheral.

NEXT STEPS: EMBEDDING AND EVOLVING THE SMALL STEPS MODEL

- Develop a staff toolkit with exemplar targets and simplified tracking templates.
- Formalise joint termly planning with SALT and OT.
- Introduce peer observation across sites and with our sponsor SEND school.

These steps will deepen the model's sustainability and enhance professional collaboration.



SCALING THE MODEL: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSIDERATIONS

The Small Steps model could be adapted for mainstream classrooms, nurture groups, or resource bases, provided key conditions are met:

- Protected time for staff reflection
- Targeted CPD on sensory and communication approaches
- Leadership support for flexible, responsive curriculum design

Its principles—valuing small steps, embedding therapy, personalising provision—are universally applicable.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER SCHOOLS OR SETTINGS

- **Start small:** Focus on one or two meaningful targets per child.
- **Embed naturally:** Integrate strategies into existing routines.
- **Collaborate early:** Involve SALT, OT, and families from the outset.
- **Track creatively:** Use photos, symbols, and narratives.
- **Celebrate often:** Share progress visibly to boost engagement.
- **Stay flexible:** Adapt targets and methods as children's needs evolve.

'SMALL STEPS ARE BIG PROGRESS'

The Ark Project continues to prove that recognising and celebrating these moments transforms not only children's learning journeys, but also the collective mindset of the whole school.

Louise Gleeson

DEPUTY HEADTEACHER & SENDCo
WELLINGTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

Harkiran Koundu

ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER FOR UPPER KS2 & ASSISTANT SENDCo
WELLINGTON PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Louise and Harkiran have described how flexible groupings were developed to fit the child – provision was adapted so that groupings were based on pupil need and regulation, not fixed structures. Are there similar opportunities to introduce more flexibility into groupings for children with SEND in your setting, ensuring the 'room fits the child, not the other way around'?
- Visual and symbolic communication has been implemented across the curriculum: Widgit symbols, AAC systems, and visual prompts supported access to learning and reduced anxiety. Are visual supports used consistently across your classrooms, and are they tailored to individual pupils rather than generic?
- There was a focus on shifting perceptions of progress: the Ark helped staff and families reframe progress as journeys, not judgements – recognising that development may not align neatly with standardised measures. How do you communicate to staff and parents that "small steps" are still signs of meaningful progress worth celebrating?
- At Wellington Primary, weekly staff reflection with Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists ensured strategies were consistent, refined, and sustainable, enabling multidisciplinary collaboration to become routine and integrated. How embedded are external specialists in your school's day-to-day planning, and could collaboration be structured more routinely?



“A key outcome has been a shift in staff mindset – small steps are now recognised as powerful, not peripheral.”

WELLINGTON PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
London

765

NUMBER ON ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
EYFS-Year 6



BOYS
50%



PP
14%



SEND
18%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Since our expansion in 2017, we have operated as a four-form entry school, serving our local community across two well-established sites. Our Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 pupils are based on a dedicated site, while our Key Stage 2 provision takes place in a split-level building – these two are split over a short distance, and in the main by the Piccadilly tube line. We are proud of the rich diversity within our school community, where over 71 languages are spoken and 93% of our pupils are learning English as an additional language. Our school experiences high pupil mobility, with 68% stability. Many of our families are contract workers, resulting in frequent transitions due to employment relocations. This is especially evident in Key Stage 2, where pupil numbers often fluctuate significantly between Years 4 and 5.



EMPOWERING NEURODIVERSE LEARNERS





NOREMARSH JUNIOR SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Improving our whole-school understanding of neurodiversity

CONTEXT

Years ago I heard Sarah Wild (Head of Limpsfield Grange) speak about the girls at her school and the struggles they had experienced in mainstream settings and how transformative coming to a school that understood them and where they felt they belonged could be. As the parent of neurodiverse children, one of whom has an EHCP and both of whom were in mainstream secondaries at the time, it was both inspiring and heartbreaking, knowing that the playing field for our neurodiverse young people is so vastly varied. As a result I have made every effort to make all the schools I have led places where everyone belongs.

INTENT

I believe inclusion starts with culture. We have worked on this for several years now. If you visited, I am confident you would see and feel our values of ambition, belonging and compassion in all your interactions. With almost 10% of our school population diagnosed as neurodivergent and a further 11% on the assessment pathway, we knew we needed to focus on this area as a team to ensure that this group feel seen, understood, and know that they belong. As a result, we undertook a school-wide piece of work to improve everyone's understanding of neurodiversity and inclusion.

“It is hugely important to us that we help to improve the confidence, self-awareness and independence of our neurodiverse children before they move on to secondary education.”

IMPLEMENTATION

I worked with the SENDCo and student manager to plan a multi-faceted approach to address this.

The main elements were as follows:

- CPD
- SEND coffee mornings
- Assemblies
- Bespoke ELSA-style sessions
- ELSA Breakfast Club

CPD

Whole staff understanding and consistency of approach is really important to me. As a result we planned and delivered CPD to all staff through INSET initially and then PDM (professional development meetings) followed up by CPD for support staff which echoed that delivered to teachers. We covered the following areas specifically: building strong relationships, sensory needs, communication, regulation, de-escalation and co-creating safe spaces.

Delivering whole-school CPD means that whether children are interacting with our office staff, our lunch time team or our teaching teams they are met with the same calm, compassionate curiosity, every time. We then follow this up with more individualised surgeries with the SENCo. I release the teachers each term to meet with the SENDCo reflecting the status given to these sessions.

We also respond rapidly with CPD as needed. For example, last year we had an in-year transfer in Year 4. The child had an EHCP and had been a corridor learner with a 1:1 TA, rarely in class. He successfully transitioned to our setting in September with work over the summer to create opportunities to identify a safe adult and safe spaces, and lay the groundwork for building relationships. This was a hugely successful approach. In February their parents fed back that they were speaking very unpleasantly about their teacher, talking about wanting to cause her harm, and they were worried. We looked at when this occurred and noticed that it always followed prolonged writing tasks and recognised it was alexithymia. We supported the teaching team to understand that this was not personal, but a reflection of how challenging they find writing. We supported the child with ELSA support and social stories, reinforced at home with parents. Their relationship was ultimately strengthened, and the teacher regularly reflects on how successful they now are at school – seeing the contribution she made to this clearly.

SEND COFFEE MORNINGS

We introduced monthly SEND coffee mornings as a way to increase engagement with this group of parents beyond formal meetings. It has an open invitation and when we have speakers (such as the school nursing team talking about anxiety or sleep) we extend the invitation to the whole community. The agenda is led by parents. For example, a group of Year 5 parents were anxious about secondary and felt they couldn't ask their questions at organised events where time with the SENDCo felt limited. We organised a morning visit with parents, children and our staff. This meant the children were able to have a tour with familiar adults and parents with time for questions before we returned to school with the children leaving the parents with the SENDCo and some of the TA team. This was so successful that it has become an annual event. The sessions have strengthened relationships significantly, leading to improved communication in both directions.



ASSEMBLIES

When planning assemblies for the year I like to have a balance of beautiful texts, role models (including through music choice) and linking to events. In April we focus on neurodiversity following World Neurodiversity Awareness Day, but also feature neurodiverse role models at other points in the year. We feature people they know such as Lucy Bronze (Lioness) who talks openly about her diagnosis of ADHD and Autism and Elle McNicoll (author). But we are also led by the children – this year they asked that I did an assembly about Satoshi Tajiri (Pokemon creator). We always include an exploration of needs and how they can be supported and met with compassion. We have talked about all the neurodiversities represented in our community, including Tourette's syndrome, Autism, ADHD and Dyslexia. I am open with the school about being dyslexic, how it makes me think differently, the challenges I have faced and how people – including children in classes I am teaching – can help. This openness has led to similar from staff and children.

For the past two years children have asked to talk about their neurodiversities in assembly, how their needs affect them in school and how our community can help. They have been open to questions and met with compassion and curiosity. When external visitors come in, including Ofsted, pupil voice has been clear that children understand that we all have different needs and some children need different support to be successful in school and beyond. They talk about the assemblies specifically and remember details year on year. The assemblies are also followed up in class in PHSE – where children can further explore a range of role models and consider the needs of children in their class. This has had a positive impact on belonging for both our neurodiverse and neurotypical community as we always talk about how we all have a role to play in this for ourselves and for others, and that understanding is key.

BESPOKE ELSA PROVISION

Several years ago we had a child in Year 6 who struggled with his understanding and acceptance of his diagnosis. Our ELSA and I worked on a series of sessions to encourage him to talk with our ELSA about his Autism diagnosis. We started with the video *What's it like to have ADHD?*¹ and each week she shared a clip of a different child talking about their ADHD and unpicked whether he could relate to that or how he experienced a similar situation. Over the six weeks he talked about feeling increasingly more confident and happier, and his mum reported the same. We have run the same kind of sessions with multiple children across Years 5 and 6 in particular, sometimes at the child's request and sometimes at the parents' request. They have been so well received that we would ultimately like to record our own version as a starting point for future conversations. It is hugely important to us that we help to improve the confidence, self-awareness and independence of our neurodiverse children before they move on to secondary education and this has been an important part of that process.

ELSA BREAKFAST CLUB

This came about from conversations at our SEND coffee mornings where multiple parents talked about how anxious their children are coming into school some days and how some find morning transitions tricky. We introduced an invite-only breakfast club. The club runs every day in a spare classroom – a quiet, familiar space. There is breakfast available, but children can also just come and play board games or read a book with their peers as a soft start. The majority of children go straight from here to class, but a handful go on to sensory circuits and then to class, meaning that they arrive in class after the register, when the class is settled and calm. Some children come for a term and then feel comfortable going back to lining up with their class on the playground, others come all year round – dependent on their needs. It has had an incredibly positive effect across the school as children arrive from here (or sensory circuits) calm and regulated and ready to learn.

The impact across our whole community of these approaches is strengthening our shared belonging and compassion. Our children know that Noremarsh is a place where everyone belongs and we are all compassionate and ambitious for all. They understand that they have responsibility in that as we all do. We have a neurodiverse child in Year 5. At a recent parents' evening, their dad stopped me to thank me for "giving him his child back". Their mum regularly talks to me about how coming to Noremarsh has been transformative for them: their child has friends, they are more regulated at home, they are keen to come to school. Belonging matters.

Hilary MacMeekin
HEADTEACHER
NOREMARSH JUNIOR SCHOOL

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“Delivering whole-school CPD means that whether children are interacting with our office staff, our lunch time team or our teaching teams they are met with the same calm, compassionate curiosity, every time.”

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Noremarsch ensured that all adults, including office staff, lunchtime supervisors and teaching teams, share the same relational, sensory-aware and regulation-informed approaches. What structures ensure that every adult in your school or setting responds to neurodiverse pupils with aligned understanding and language, and where might additional CPD strengthen consistency?
- Children at Noremarsch speak openly in assemblies about their neurodiversity, supported by a compassionate ethos that welcomes questions and curiosity. What opportunities exist in your setting for neurodiverse learners to articulate their needs and experiences safely, and how might you widen platforms for authentic, supported pupil voice?
- By sharing their own neurodiversity openly, staff model vulnerability, normalise difference and cultivate empathy across the school. In your setting, how might staff narratives, role models or lived experiences be used ethically and safely to deepen children's understanding that difference exists everywhere, even among the adults they trust?
- Noremarsch teaches children that belonging is created collectively, by neurodiverse and neurotypical pupils alike. How do your pupils understand their role in building a compassionate community, and what opportunities help them practise empathy, advocacy and peer support?

NOREMARSH JUNIOR SCHOOL



REGION
Wiltshire

169

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 3 - Year 6



BOYS
50%



PP
17%



SEND
24%



THE LANGLEY ACADEMY

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS3-4

Under the umbrella: creating an ADHD-inclusive school environment

The Langley Academy is a co-educational academy in Langley, east of Slough, Berkshire, sponsored by The Arbib Foundation and under the Local Authority of Slough. The school has 1,149 students, 55% of whom are male, 21% receive free school meals, 19% qualify for the Pupil Premium, and 14% have a SEND status, including 3.3% (38 students) with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

At The Langley Academy, our learning environment is designed to spark curiosity, promote exploration and embrace diverse perspectives, aligning with the school's strapline: **Curiosity, Exploration and Discovery**. The vision is to nurture confident, inquisitive and inclusive learners who engage meaningfully with the world around them, contribute positively to society and live enriched, fulfilled lives.

Staff across the Trust are encouraged to innovate, challenge convention and embrace creativity to inspire the next generation. Their practice is guided by three questions:

- How is curiosity being inspired in students?
- In what ways are students supported to explore their interests more deeply?
- What discoveries are students making as a result of their learning?

This reflective framework underpins the school's culture of innovation, courage and lifelong learning.

INTENT

This project aimed to address a growing need for inclusive practices to support students with ADHD at The Langley Academy. Nationally, ADHD referrals have surged; in March 2025 alone, nearly 20,000 people were newly referred for ADHD assessment – a 13.5% rise from March 2024.¹ Reflecting this national trend, the Academy has seen a sharp increase in students either diagnosed with ADHD or exhibiting ADHD traits.

A more structured, informed and empathetic approach was needed to help these learners thrive academically and emotionally. The project also sought to:

- **Reduce stigma surrounding ADHD;**
- **Enhance staff confidence in supporting neurodiverse learners;**
- **Align inclusive practice with the school's core values of curiosity, exploration and discovery.**

Building on the Academy's involvement with the ADHD Foundation Umbrella Project ², the initiative used the visual display of colourful umbrellas, symbolising the diversity of neurodivergent minds, as both an inspiration and a springboard for deeper cultural change. Ten students across Years 7-11 were selected to represent a range of ADHD presentations, including those diagnosed, under assessment, or exhibiting clear ADHD traits. Selection ensured a mix of academic, behavioural and emotional profiles. Participating staff included subject teachers who taught these students regularly, chosen for their ability to trial and evaluate inclusive teaching strategies within their subject contexts. The project was designed to deepen understanding of ADHD, evaluate barriers to inclusion and implement practical strategies that improve engagement and learning outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION

The project was guided by three research parameters:

1. Identifying barriers to inclusion for students with ADHD.
2. Embedding the ADHD Umbrella Project into the school's culture.
3. Enhancing classroom practice to better support learners with ADHD.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods ensured a holistic evidence base. Surveys and interviews were conducted with students, parents and staff to capture perceptions and experiences, while academic progress, behaviour data and attendance were used to establish baselines and measure impact.

Classroom learning walks and observations identified strengths, areas for development and opportunities for training. A colleague independent of daily student interactions collected and analysed survey data to ensure neutrality and openness in responses.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We gathered initial data through student surveys, supported by staff where needed. Each participating student was observed in at least three lessons and teachers and support staff provided additional feedback. Students were categorised as low-, average-, or high-needs based on the compiled evidence. Follow-up one-to-one interviews verified survey findings and explored student experiences in greater depth. Parental perspectives were also captured through calls and surveys to triangulate data.

The combined insights formed the basis for personalised student profiles: succinct, first-person documents outlining each student's strengths, challenges and recommended support strategies. These A4 profiles became working tools for staff, highlighting quality-first teaching strategies and developmental priorities.

Key strategies introduced included:

- Reasonable adjustments such as movement breaks, flexible seating and time-out passes.
- Differentiated instruction and scaffolding to maintain engagement and reduce cognitive overload.
- Staff training sessions on ADHD awareness and inclusive practice.
- Integration of the ADHD Umbrella Project into assemblies, PSHE lessons and visual displays.
- Student-led assemblies and awareness campaigns, allowing learners with ADHD to share their experiences and challenge misconceptions.

Staff were encouraged to engage with an online professional debate on neurodiversity³, promoting reflection and shared dialogue on inclusive pedagogy.



EVOLVING THE APPROACH

As the project progressed, findings highlighted the need for more personalised, student-centred approaches beyond general awareness-raising. This shift led to:

- The creation of detailed individual profiles capturing learning preferences, triggers and successful strategies.
- Targeted interventions, including mentoring, sensory regulation support and structured check-ins.
- Person-Centred Planning⁴ meetings, facilitated by an Educational Psychologist for high-needs students. These meetings gave pupils space to articulate their aspirations and co-produce support plans with parents and staff.
- Expanded stakeholder involvement: initially limited to classroom teachers, participation grew to include pastoral teams, faculty leads and Teaching Assistants, embedding the project across the wider school community.

This broad collaboration fostered shared accountability for inclusion and helped build a more cohesive culture of support.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED

Despite the positive momentum, several challenges emerged:

- Attendance and engagement among high-needs students were inconsistent, often due to anxiety, external support gaps, or strained relationships.
- Workload pressures made it difficult for some teachers to implement adjustments consistently.
- A small number of staff expressed concerns that ADHD was being used to excuse poor behaviour, revealing underlying misconceptions.
- Inconsistency across departments meant that the pace and quality of implementation varied.

These issues were addressed through targeted CPD, simplified expectations and follow-up learning walks and book reviews. Additional mentoring and peer support also helped strengthen teacher confidence.

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

- Students were engaged and enthusiastic, valuing opportunities to be heard and involved in shaping their support.
- Parents were largely positive, appreciating the communication and personalisation, though a few required reassurance about the school's behaviour policy.
- Staff responses were mixed; many welcomed training and collaboration, while others required more time and guidance to embed new practices.

These differing reactions reflected varied levels of experience, confidence and familiarity with ADHD, underscoring the importance of ongoing dialogue and reinforcement.⁵

IMPACT

MEASURING OUTCOMES

Impact was assessed through triangulated data:

- Quantitative: behaviour logs, achievement points, attendance and progress data.
- Qualitative: surveys, interviews, learning walks and observation records.

Cross-referencing these data sources provided a reliable picture of impact while reducing bias. The inclusion of a neutral data collector enhanced the credibility of findings.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Increased staff understanding:** most staff reported greater awareness of ADHD and felt more confident implementing reasonable adjustments.
- **Improved student engagement:** observations showed higher participation, better focus and reduced classroom disruption among profiled students.
- **Student empowerment:** the first-person profiles gave students ownership of their learning and a sense of being understood and valued.
- **Enhanced relationships:** staff-student trust improved, especially where adults implemented agreed strategies consistently.

However, inconsistent integration across departments limited whole-school impact. While the ADHD Umbrella Project's visual presence was strong, its principles were not yet fully embedded into teaching practice. As a result, there was concern that the display risked becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

The initiative succeeded in raising awareness and strengthening understanding but revealed that sustainable cultural change requires time, leadership support and continuous CPD. Drawing on Hesselbein's⁶ perspective, meaningful transformation occurs not through intention alone, but when organisational culture evolves to reflect inclusive principles in daily interactions. The Langley Academy's journey highlights the importance of embedding inclusion as both a pedagogical and cultural norm rather than an isolated project.

MOST EFFECTIVE STRANDS

1. **Student profiles** – empowered learners, clarified expectations and equipped staff with practical guidance.
2. **Student-led awareness activities** – fostered empathy, challenged stigma and made neurodiversity visible and celebrated.
3. **Collaborative monitoring** – learning walks, feedback and ongoing data review ensured strategies were evidence-informed and responsive.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Raising awareness is only the first step; embedding change demands sustained practice and reflection.
- Staff willingness exists but varies in confidence and capacity; consistent training and reinforcement are essential.
- Student voice is a powerful driver for inclusion. When pupils feel heard, they engage more positively.
- Parental collaboration strengthens trust and continuity between home and school.
- Leadership and modelling from senior staff are vital to maintaining focus and accountability.

Regular CPD sessions, some led internally and others by an Educational Psychologist, proved valuable, but the next phase should include more peer-led sessions showcasing effective classroom practice. Expanding parental training on ADHD and school responsibilities would also help align expectations and reinforce consistency.

Overall, the project demonstrated that awareness and understanding can be achieved relatively quickly, but cultural transformation requires ongoing reinforcement and alignment of values, systems and behaviours.

NEXT STEPS

Building on the progress made, The Langley Academy will participate in a Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) pilot programme focused on neurodiversity.⁷ This whole-school initiative marks a significant step forward in embedding inclusive education more systematically and sustainably.

Planned developments include:

- **Deepening staff training:** introduce peer-led CPD sessions where experienced teachers share practical strategies that work in their classrooms.
- **Expanding student voice:** establish a Student Advisory Group to co-design initiatives and maintain student representation.
- **Parental engagement:** deliver workshops to strengthen understanding of ADHD and school inclusion policies.
- **Curriculum integration:** embed inclusive strategies into lesson planning and departmental schemes of work.
- **Monitoring impact:** conduct follow-up learning walks, surveys and data reviews to track progress.

“Student-led awareness activities fostered empathy, challenged stigma and made neurodiversity more visible and celebrated.”



SCALING AND SUSTAINABILITY

Pilot departments will model best practice before a school-wide rollout. A comprehensive ADHD-Inclusion Toolkit, including templates, case studies and CPD resources, will be created to ensure consistency and ease of implementation. Student ambassadors will also be introduced to promote awareness and peer support, embedding the values of empathy, curiosity and inclusion across all year groups.

Leadership commitment and strategic planning will ensure the initiative remains prioritised and resourced effectively. Regular evaluation will inform adjustments and sustain momentum.

Suggestions for other schools

- Centre the project around student voice; it brings authenticity and ownership.
- Deliver ongoing, practical CPD that links research with real classroom examples.
- Promote a culture of empathy over compliance to foster genuine inclusion.
- Use both qualitative and quantitative data to guide decisions and measure success.
- Recognise that true cultural change is gradual, requiring consistency, leadership backing and collective responsibility.

Through *'Under the Umbrella,'* we have taken meaningful steps toward becoming an ADHD-inclusive school. While challenges remain, the project has ignited awareness, empowered students and laid a strong foundation for further and sustained cultural transformation.

Joseph Matshazi

SENDCo

THE LANGLEY ACADEMY

“The project demonstrated that awareness and understanding can be achieved relatively quickly, but cultural transformation requires ongoing reinforcement and alignment of values, systems and behaviours.”

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- ⁴ PCPATH (n.d.) **PCPATH explained for young people, parents and schools (KS2/3)**. [PDF] Available from: https://5f2fe3253cd1dfa0d089-bf8b2cdb6a1dc2999fecbc372702016c.ssl.cf3.rackcdn.com/uploads/ckeditor/attachments/15405/PCPATH_explained_for_YP__parents_and_school__KS2_3_-_can_be_sent_in_advance.pdf [Accessed 14 May 2025].
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ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Joseph has described how student-led assemblies challenged stigma and built empathy. How might you create opportunities for neurodiverse students to lead in your setting – shaping awareness, contributing to staff training, or supporting peers?
- For The Langley Academy, variability across subjects limited whole-school impact. In your school or setting, what two or three non-negotiable expectations for ADHD-inclusive practice could bring greater consistency across classrooms?
- The Academy's work also highlighted the value of deepening partnerships with parents. How could you make communication with families clearer, calmer and more predictable during support planning? What opportunities could you create to help parents understand the adjustments made in school and how they can reinforce these at home?
- Embedding inclusion within the culture of the Academy required alignment across policies, planning and CPD. Are there any similar priorities or opportunities in your setting to align policies, curriculum planning and CPD that help to ensure that inclusion is woven into daily school life?

THE LANGLEY ACADEMY



REGION
Berkshire

1149

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7 - Year 13



BOYS
55.2%



PP
19.3%



SEND
14%



HPA
24.7%



AN ARTICLE BY GARY LOBBETT

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Time to include: how arts education transforms expression, aspiration and equity for learners with SEND

BEYOND PARTICIPATION: INCLUSION THROUGH THE ARTS

When a child with complex needs explores rhythm, texture, or movement, something deeper than artistic activity occurs - a bridge between self and world, a space where connection and creativity meet. Arts education for learners with SEND is not remedial. It can enable communication to flourish where language is limited and confidence to grow where self-doubt has long taken root. Whether through painting, drama, music, or dance, creative engagement allows pupils to make meaning on their own terms.

Recent research underscores this power. A 2025 randomised controlled trial of music therapy for children with autism reported significant gains in social skills and expressive language.¹ Meta-analyses of art therapy² show reduced anxiety and improved self-esteem in children and adolescents with additional needs. Across studies, the conclusion is consistent: through the arts, engagement and empathy grow together.

A systematic review by Doyle et al³ explored how creative art-based pedagogies function in mainstream classrooms. Synthesising over a decade of international studies, it found that when artistic learning is co-designed with students, flexibly delivered, and embedded in school culture, it fosters clear gains in agency and sensory regulation. Learners reported that creative processes provided space to ‘show what I think without words’, while teachers noted improved social connection and engagement. The review warns that outcomes depend on pedagogy: one-off sessions or token inclusion rarely achieve these benefits. Instead, sustained, strengths-based approaches, where arts practice is integral to the curriculum and supported through staff collaboration, enable autistic learners to thrive. Its conclusion is simple, and it matters: arts education isn’t enrichment; it’s equity in action.

Here are two examples that illustrate what the arts can offer when creative education meets the needs of neurodiverse learners – and what can be lost when it misses.

Sam is a highly accomplished pianist. I vividly recall him explaining that he was angry with his music teacher. Sam was refusing to practise a piece of music the teacher had asked him to prepare for his GCSE performance. The piece was by Beethoven, but Sam insisted that a particular passage was ‘all wrong.’ He felt so strongly about it that he simply would not play it. In Sam’s neurodiverse reality, this was not a matter of opinion - Beethoven was mistaken, and that was that. No debate, no compromise, and from Sam’s perspective, no reason to continue. Grounded in his particular neurodivergent model of the world, his decision was entirely inflexible, yet also entirely understandable.

If Sam’s world was defined by sound and structure, George’s was drawn in line and colour. From his earliest years, he was captivated by superheroes, sketching them with obsessive precision: each muscle, mask and shadow rendered with astonishing realism. George’s attention to detail was remarkable. By the age of ten, his teachers were already marvelling at his gift, urging him to take GCSE Art. Yet that was where things began to unravel. His teacher wanted still life: fruit, flowers, trees. George had no interest in any of it. He compromised briefly, drawing a flower or apple, but always beside a superhero rescuing or holding it aloft. The teacher was unimpressed, the grades slipped, and eventually George stopped drawing altogether. And with that, his world narrowed. Had his creativity been nurtured rather than redirected, George might now be an illustrator or designer. As things stand, George has decided he can’t draw.

THE PEDAGOGY OF POSSIBILITY

Arts education aligns closely with Jerome Bruner’s view of learning as the active construction of meaning⁴, grounded in imagination, play, and exploration. Bruner argued that learners construct knowledge through engagement with experience, narrative, and culture, rather than through passive transmission. For pupils with SEND, this approach is vital: within creative processes, learners practise skills that underpin success far beyond the art room.

ARTS AS EQUITY: THE RIGHT TO EXPRESSION

The Cultural Learning Alliance’s Report Card⁵ notes that pupils with additional needs remain among the least likely to access sustained arts opportunities, a pattern echoing the wider ‘arts entitlement gap’ in disadvantaged areas. When creative provision narrows, so too does access to agency and aspiration. For many learners, the result is double exclusion: from artistic participation and from the social affirmation it provides.

Equitable arts education is therefore not enrichment, it is entitlement. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 30) enshrines participation in cultural life as a universal right. Realising that right in schools means treating the arts as infrastructure for belonging – embedding creative learning across the curriculum, ensuring sensory supports and accessible technologies, and designing pathways that value how children learn, not only what they produce.

This shift from provision to participation is critical. It moves arts access beyond tokenism, beyond the annual performance or display board, and positions creativity as a primary mode of inclusion. In inclusive classrooms, artistic expression is not a reward for good behaviour but a tool for communication, connection and joy.

“When a child with complex needs explores rhythm, texture, or movement, something deeper than artistic activity occurs - a bridge between self and world, a space where connection and creativity meet.”



FROM OUTCOMES TO IMPACT

The most effective arts programmes measure impact not only in technical skill but in human growth. In practice, schools often track progress through indicators such as:

- **Engagement: active participation, attention span and motivation levels.**
- **Communication: verbal and non-verbal initiation, peer interaction.**
- **Emotional regulation: self-calming strategies, mood stability, resilience.**
- **Skills progression: creative decision-making, fine and gross motor development.**
- **Confidence and agency: independence, leadership, risk-taking.**
- **Staff capability: confidence in adapting pedagogy for neurodiverse learners.**

These indicators mirror the Education Endowment Foundation's⁶ analysis, which ranks arts participation as delivering moderate to high academic impact for very low cost for all pupils, including those who face disadvantage or have additional needs. In practice, this means that investment in arts inclusion not only enhances wellbeing but contributes directly to attainment.

When schools adopt such metrics, linking creative engagement to the outcomes already valued in EHCPs and inspection frameworks, the arts move from peripheral to strategic. They become a core mechanism for delivering SEND progress, not a pleasant distraction from it.

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

Embedding inclusive arts education requires strong and sustained leadership. School leaders must position creative engagement as integral to SEND provision, alongside literacy, numeracy, and social communication. This involves partnerships with cultural organisations, investment in staff CPD, and frameworks for evidencing both academic and developmental impact. Crucially, this work must be cumulative. A single workshop or visiting artist cannot replace the long-term, scaffolded experiences through which pupils develop creative habits of mind: curiosity, reflection, resilience, and pride.

In this respect, progression in the arts mirrors progression in literacy. Just as voice in writing emerges through revision, so mastery in the arts develops through iteration and intent. Excellence in creative learning is not spontaneous; it is cultivated over time through challenge, encouragement, and feedback.

It is important for teachers not to impose their adult, subjective interpretation onto a child's exposition of any art. For Sam, George and all children and young people with SEND, the arts offer a language beyond words. Their stories reveal how profoundly the arts mirror cognition and emotion and how fragile those connections become when creative expression is misunderstood or constrained.

Arts education does not simply enhance learning; it redefines what learning is - expressive, inclusive and profoundly human. When schools commit to this vision, they move from providing access to enabling artistry, where inclusion becomes celebration rather than compliance. In doing so, they realise the arts' deepest promise: that every learner, regardless of need or label, can experience the full dignity of creative expression, and, in doing so, help reshape our understanding of excellence itself.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

- Provide iterative pathways by breaking creative projects into stages with feedback points, modelling that improvement comes through refinement, not perfection.
- Use process-focused assessment (journals, audio reflections, photographs of stages, rehearsal logs) not only final outputs.
- Offer structured choice: allowing students to choose from a curated set of creative tasks.
- Establish cross-departmental creative working groups to share approaches, resources, and examples of work.
- Ensure equitable access by embedding inclusive arts in school improvement plans, linking creative engagement explicitly to wellbeing and attainment.
- Plan for progression over years, not sessions - sequenced experiences that allow learners to build an identity as an artist.

QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION THEMES FOR DEPARTMENT OR TEAM MEETINGS:

- In what ways do we communicate high expectations for all learners' creative potential?
- How well do we understand our pupils' interests, and how consistently do we enable them to shape creative tasks?
- What would a 'process-rich' rather than 'product-heavy' curriculum look like in our subject?
- Do our assessment practices accommodate neurodivergent forms of creativity or expression?
- How might we document the iterative stages of creative learning more effectively?
- Where in our lessons is there space for exploration, improvisation, or student-led decision making?
- Do we provide enough guided structure for those who need it, without limiting creative autonomy?
- What routines help pupils feel safe enough to take risks in creative tasks?
- What opportunities exist (or could be established) for sharing inclusive creative practice across subjects?

“Learners reported that creative processes provided space to ‘show what I think without words,’ while teachers noted improved social connection and engagement.”

FURTHER READING AND ORGANISATIONS TO EXPLORE

- **Embracing Arts**, a theatre and creative arts organisation dedicated to making inclusive theatre for children with special educational and/or complex needs.
- **Breathe Arts Health Research**, designs and delivers creative programmes (using music, singing, dance and other art forms) that respond to specific clinical needs or wellbeing goals.
- **Cultural Learning Alliance (CLA)**, a leading source of arts/cultural news, insight and opinion.
- **Arts Council England (Creative People and Places / Youth Engagement Programmes)**, provides funding, research, and support for inclusive arts provision and community-driven creative programmes.
- **Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)**, have an Education department that partners with schools to embed drama and creative pedagogy across the curriculum.

Gary Lobbett

PiXL INSIGHTS PROJECT MENTOR AND EDUCATION CONSULTANT

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GARY LOBBETT PiXL INSIGHTS PROJECT MENTOR AND EDUCATION CONSULTANT

Gary is a member of the PiXL Insights team and education consultant working with schools and Trusts to shape strategies that improve outcomes and life chances for young people. A musician by background, he champions creativity and the arts in education and works with partners to promote The Arts Pledge, a social enterprise dedicated to securing every child's right to high-quality arts and cultural experiences.





THE ROSEWOOD SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KEY STAGE 4

Addressing anxiety and increasing engagement to improve mathematics outcomes for girls with Autism Spectrum Condition

CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL AND PROJECT INTENT

The Rosewood School (TRS) supports pupils with a wide range of medical, health, and physical needs. Many experience extended absences from mainstream education or require alternative provision to support their emotional wellbeing and academic development. Among our Key Stage 4 cohort, an emerging pattern showed that a higher proportion of pupils achieved Grade 4+ in English than in mathematics. Analysis also revealed a gender imbalance in referrals, with more girls than boys joining the school, many of whom were either diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) or on the diagnostic pathway. From discussions with pupils, teachers, and families, it became evident that mathematics generated a particular sense of worry for many pupils. This was especially noticeable among girls with ASC, who often spoke about low confidence, past negative experiences, or feeling overwhelmed by the subject.

Our project set out to:

- understand the barriers that were making mathematics feel inaccessible
- develop approaches that reduced anxiety and helped pupils feel more able to take part
- adapt teaching so that learning felt more manageable and encouraging
- improve pupil outcomes by the end of Year 11

We also wanted to explore the connection between autism, gender and maths anxiety – an area where there is very little practical guidance. The aim was not only to support current pupils but to create approaches that could be shared more widely across subjects.

IMPLEMENTATION

PROJECT DESIGN AND SCOPE

The project, 'Supporting Girls with ASC in Mathematics', began in September 2023 and focused on Key Stage 4 pupils (Years 10 and 11). The Maths Lead worked with four maths teachers across our three sites, including colleagues who support pupils learning remotely. Although mathematics was the central focus, the project evolved into a whole-school professional learning journey. We wanted to understand not only what was happening in maths lessons, but how similar approaches might help pupils across the curriculum. Training sessions were later provided for all teaching and support staff to explore how the principles of structure, predictability, and communication could enhance provision across subjects and within pastoral or inclusion support.

Initial research involved reviewing a wide range of literature and online sources. It quickly became evident that while there is extensive research into maths anxiety and separate studies exploring girls and autism, very little combines both areas. This strengthened our belief that a practitioner-led project could make a real difference. Pupil data was used to identify those who were most likely to benefit, usually pupils whose starting points in maths were significantly lower than expected or who showed clear signs of disengagement. Case studies were created to bring together assessment information, pupil voice and staff observation. The project was discussed with the Executive Headteacher as part of the school's broader drive to raise standards in core subjects. One of these routines, the 'Power of 3', became central to the work. It encouraged the use of three short, daily recall activities at the start of each lesson that helped pupils to settle more quickly and revisit essential knowledge without pressure: to consolidate key concepts and build confidence through repetition and routine.

TEACHING APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES TRIALLED

Over the year, the team tested a range of approaches to reduce anxiety and make learning feel more achievable. These included:

- **Individual support sessions** to identify where difficulties began – for some it was mathematical recall, for others it was understanding the language in exam-style questions or simply feeling overwhelmed due to previous experiences.
- **Predictable lesson routines** using the 'Power of 3' and clear step-by-step transitions.
- **Concrete – Visual – Abstract (CVA) approaches**, giving pupils time to explore ideas in a practical way before moving on to written representation.
- **Visual and multisensory tools**, including maths mats, manipulatives, and simple digital resources such as Blooket.
- **Reduced sensory load**, such as calmer displays, fewer distractions, and allowing pupils quiet processing time.
- **Challenging fixed beliefs**, using encouragement and small, achievable steps to help pupils notice their progress.

Teachers met fortnightly to share what was working and what needed adjusting. The ideas that helped most pupils were built into everyday practice and later shared with the whole staff team during training in May 2024. Progress was monitored through baseline assessments, end-of-unit tasks, GCSE-style papers, pupil voice and staff reflection – giving a balanced picture of both learning and confidence.

“From discussions with pupils, teachers, and families, it became evident that mathematics generated a particular sense of worry for many pupils.”

IMPACT

FINDINGS AND KEY INSIGHTS

The project confirmed that for most pupils, difficulties in mathematics were not about capability. Instead, they came from a mixture of sensory, cognitive and emotional factors:

- **Sensory overload**, such as busy walls or noisy environments
- **Feeling overwhelmed by the amount or pace of work**
- **Gaps in prior knowledge**, meaning new ideas did not always connect
- **Difficulty with abstract concepts**, especially when lessons moved on too quickly
- **Anxiety linked to performance**, particularly under time pressure
- **Low confidence and long-held beliefs** like 'I can't do maths'
- **Low motivation**, often shaped by previous negative experiences



Through the introduction of structured routines, visual supports, and collaborative teaching, pupils began to demonstrate improved engagement and reduced anxiety. Pupil questionnaires showed that:

- **76% felt confident or supported in maths lessons**
- **16% said they did not enjoy maths**
- **43% felt they were 'good at maths'**

Although there is still work to do, especially around confidence, these are encouraging early signs. We have also had some incredibly positive outcomes for individual pupils, as the two case studies below evidence.

CASE STUDY 1

Child A - Year 11 2023/2024. On the ASC pathway.

In September 2023, Child A completed a past GCSE maths paper and achieved a grade 2+. However, she was already working at a grade 5 in English. She lacked confidence in her own mathematical abilities and struggled to recall prior knowledge.

The use of Power of 3 really helped her to practise key concepts on a regular basis, as well as providing a clear structure, hence helping to ease any anxieties when entering the classroom. She thrived on opportunities to verbalise her ideas and explain concepts to her peers, which in turn secured her understanding. Therefore the use of "student as teacher" and techniques like "prove it" and "convince me" were used regularly to cement understanding.

An avid reader, she struggled to unpick word problems that were used in exam papers, so sample questions were frequently incorporated into lessons. Child A found success in highlighting key words, getting rid of unnecessary information (which she found distracting) and found the technique of summarising the question really helpful.

Child A achieved a maths GCSE grade 4.

CASE STUDY 2

Child B (AFAB) - Year 11 2023/24. Diagnosed with ASC.

On arrival at the Rosewood School, Child B completed a past GCSE maths paper and achieved a grade 3+. However, according to FFT data, he was targeted to achieve a grade 6. He was extremely frustrated in his mathematical abilities and "couldn't remember anything".

Initially he found it difficult to engage in learning, however a clear routine and structure to lessons, including the Power of 3, main input and independent tasks, helped to ease this anxiety. He found it valuable to have maths facts in the form of maths mats readily available to support his learning as well as having GCSE formulae stuck in the front of his maths book to refer back to as needed. Providing visual examples of different concepts really helped to secure his understanding, as well as providing real-life examples of when different concepts were used in the real world.

Although he was reluctant to work in large groups, paired work with a trusted friend was invaluable for him to explain his reasoning, especially when they had different solutions to problems. Opportunities to explore past papers and mark schemes also helped him to feel more familiar with the structure of his upcoming exams, so it wasn't completely unknown territory.

Child B achieved a maths GCSE grade 6.

One of the most valuable parts of the project was the way it encouraged staff reflection on practice. Teachers across other subjects began to think more deeply about cognitive load, sensory environment and how pupils prepare emotionally for learning. This strengthened links with the inclusion team and helped shape approaches in other areas of the curriculum.

NEXT STEPS

Based on what we have learned, the following areas will be taken forward:

- **Applying CVA approaches across subjects, particularly those with abstract content**
- **Developing vocabulary strategies, including the use of the Frayer Model for key terminology**
- **Continuing to build self-efficacy, helping pupils recognise their progress more explicitly**
- **Strengthening pupil voice, using regular feedback to inform planning**
- **Sharing our learning with others, contributing to SEND networks across Kent and offering training on supporting pupils with ASC and maths anxiety**

This project has provided valuable insights into how girls with ASC experience mathematics and how small, deliberate adaptations can make learning more accessible, calm, and motivating. By combining research, reflective practice, and pupil voice, the school has begun to close the confidence gap that so often precedes the attainment gap.

The findings reinforce the principle that when teaching approaches are inclusive and responsive to pupils' emotional needs, all pupils benefit. Above all, this work has reminded us of something we see every day: success in mathematics is shaped not only by skill, but by how secure, calm and supported pupils feel when learning. When those foundations are in place, pupils are far more likely to make sustained and meaningful progress.

Anna Smith
HEAD OF MATHEMATICS
THE ROSEWOOD SCHOOL

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ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Anna has described how classrooms were adapted to minimise distractions, with calmer displays and attention to noise levels, supporting focus and regulation and reducing sensory overload in maths lessons. How might you review the sensory environments of your classrooms to identify and/or remove barriers that may affect pupils' levels of engagement or concentration?
- At Rosewood School, teachers made explicit when learning moved from concrete examples to abstract concepts, using visuals, manipulatives, and clear explanations. Do your pupils know when they are working with abstract ideas? Are there specific strategies that could support pupils to bridge that shift? For similar reasons, extra time was built into lessons to allow pupils to process information and reduce cognitive overload. Could there also be benefits in your setting for including intentional pauses for thinking and consolidation, especially, perhaps, for anxious learners?
- The two case studies Anna has shared clearly illustrate the power that peer-led classroom talk had on developing confidence and belief in their mathematical skills, whether through strategies like 'student as teacher' or through paired metacognitive talk. How do you identify (and share across teaching teams) what classroom talk strategies are particularly effective for different students? You may want to explore PiXL's Communication and Language CPD, developed with Jean Gross CBE, which includes lots of examples of strategies you may want to consider.

THE ROSEWOOD SCHOOL



REGION
Kent

100

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7-Year 11



BOYS
18%



PP
33%



SEND
100%



HPA
27%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION The Rosewood School is a PRU (physical and mental health) in Kent. We have three schools in Leybourne (up to 60 pupils), Canterbury (up to 36 pupils) and Staplehurst (up to 10) which is part of the Kent and Medway Adolescent Hospital. We also run three Secondary remote groups for children who are not well enough to attend school (up to 12 pupils in each) and two Primary remote groups (up to 6 in each). Due to the nature of our setting, the data above changes constantly!



BY ZEN EDUCATE

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Towards meaningful inclusion in secondary schools for students with ADHD

Inclusion has always been important in supporting learners with additional needs in mainstream education, but the stakes have never been higher. With inclusion now a key pillar of the new Ofsted framework and central to the DfE's mainstream education strategy, schools must rethink how they structure support.

“The heart of inclusion is not about fitting in, but about making thoughtful modifications and adjustments to support each learner to succeed.”

“Despite being one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions in secondary schools, ADHD is frequently misunderstood, misidentified, or reduced to a behaviour management concern.”

THE PROBLEM WITH OUR CURRENT APPROACH

As the government's Inclusion in Practice¹ has highlighted, secondary schools face real challenges in how they approach SEND. The prevailing model often tries to categorise learners and prescribe interventions in a rigid way, similar to diagnosing a medical condition and applying a standardised treatment. But education is not medicine. Learners are not patients, and their needs cannot be neatly boxed into diagnostic categories with prescribed remedies. Broad SEND labels can sometimes obscure more than they reveal, grouping learners with very different needs, including those with co-occurring conditions, under umbrella terms like 'autism' or 'ADHD'. A diagnosis alone can't tell us what a child needs in order to succeed in Year 9 English or navigate the social complexities of breaktime. Moving beyond labels means asking: 'What is getting in the way of their learning, and how can we help remove or reduce that barrier?' It requires schools to shift from asking 'What is their diagnosis?' to asking 'What exactly is getting in the way of their learning, and how can we remove or reduce that barrier?' The heart of inclusion is not about fitting in, but about making thoughtful modifications and adjustments to support each learner to succeed.

“This is the real work of inclusion: not labelling and categorising, but observing, understanding, and responding to the needs of the individual in front of us.”

ADHD AND SECONDARY

Secondary schools need coherent, graduated support systems that follow pupils across subjects and transitions. They need inclusion to be a strategic priority, not something delegated to a single SENDCo or pastoral team. The fragmented nature of secondary education makes it both the most challenging environment for inclusive practice and the one where systematic, whole-school approaches can have the greatest impact.

Yet even schools committed to inclusion often struggle with ADHD. Despite being one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions in secondary schools, ADHD is frequently misunderstood, misidentified, or reduced to a behaviour management concern. Teachers across different departments may respond entirely differently to the same student's needs – one offering movement breaks and scaffolded tasks, another interpreting the same behaviours as defiance or poor attitude.

This is especially relevant because there is not one definitive clinical test for ADHD so diagnosis can be difficult. Many children have problems with self-control from time to time and it is difficult to know when this is a 'milestone' behaviour or when it could be as a result of ADHD. Treating complex neurodevelopmental needs through a simplistic, medicalised lens can get in the way of building shared understanding and coherent support systems.

Inclusion is particularly challenging within secondary school environments. The transition from KS2 to KS3 often sees support systems fracture; pupils who were well supported in primary can find themselves struggling as they navigate the complexities of secondary school, with multiple staff, competing demands, and an expectation of increasing independence without the scaffolding to achieve it.

ADHD LOOKS DIFFERENT DAY-TO-DAY AND ACROSS YEAR GROUPS:

KS3: Students often display impulsivity and emotional volatility. They may struggle with the transition from primary school, where they had one teacher, to managing multiple subjects, teachers and organisational demands.

KS4: Executive dysfunction becomes more pronounced, leading to disengagement, task refusal and attendance issues. What looks like defiance is often a student overwhelmed by planning, prioritising and managing multiple deadlines.



HOW WE'RE HELPING SCHOOLS SUPPORT THEIR STUDENTS WITH ADHD

Zen Educate works with over 2,000 schools across the UK and we've seen firsthand the challenges they face in making inclusion work in practice. We have developed specialist training programmes designed specifically for secondary schools led by Lisa May Thornley, our dedicated SEND & Safeguarding Advisor.

Our in-person workshops focus on effective secondary ADHD practice, which includes:

- **RECOGNITION:** Top signs and what they look like during lessons - not just diagnostic criteria, but real classroom presentations.
- **DE-ESCALATION STRATEGIES:** How to avoid triggering escalation through predictable routines, calm framing, low-confrontation language, and celebrating micro-successes.
- **PRACTICAL FRAMEWORKS:** Staff respond well to clear, repeatable tools such as CALM, PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy), Conscious Discipline, co-regulation leading to self-regulation, and perspective-taking and social stories for older students.
- **QUICK WINS OVER THEORY:** Scripts, de-escalation phrases, routines for transitions, predictable seating plans, visual scaffolds - small adaptations that reduce cognitive load and make an immediate difference.

Lisa's sessions equip staff with tools they can use immediately. Schools consistently report that her training transforms not just knowledge, but confidence and practice.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Secondary schools are ready to act. There's a strong appetite to improve, and many are already changing how they work. But this requires moving beyond generic SEND training toward specialist, evidence-informed professional development that addresses the specific and complex needs of students with ADHD.

When we build this expertise into the core of mainstream provision, we create truly inclusive secondary settings where the right support is available in the right place at the right time - not as an add-on, but as strategic and shared responsibility across the whole school.

Lisa Thornley
SEND & SAFEGUARDING ADVISOR
ZEN EDUCATE

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“The transition from KS2 to KS3 often sees support systems fracture; pupils who were well supported in primary can find themselves struggling as they navigate the complexities of secondary school.”



ABOUT ZEN EDUCATE

Zen Educate is a social enterprise created to help schools access high-quality staff and practical support without adding strain to budgets. We work with over 2,000 schools across the UK and see firsthand the pressures leaders face in delivering effective, inclusive provision while managing day-to-day staffing challenges.

A key part of our mission is strengthening inclusion practice, which is why we provide pro bono training to schools led by our SEND & Safeguarding Advisor, Lisa Thornley. Lisa is a qualified teacher, SENDCo, and Drama Therapist, and previously served as Deputy Head of Inclusion and Educational Safeguarding Advisor for Lewisham Council.

Her training is deliberately practical and evidence-informed. Rather than abstract theory, Lisa focuses on strategies staff can use immediately: understanding unexpected behaviours, supporting students with ADHD or autism, and developing consistent, whole-school approaches to mental health, trauma and relational practice.

Schools consistently tell us that her workshops improve not just knowledge, but confidence. The combination of clarity, practical tools and sector expertise makes the training immediately impactful - helping staff respond to diverse needs with greater understanding and skill.

The logo for Zen Educate is displayed on a blue rectangular background. The word "zen" is written in a lowercase, white, sans-serif font, with the 'z' and 'n' having a slightly rounded, modern feel. Below "zen", the word "EDUCATE" is written in a smaller, uppercase, white, sans-serif font.



BY SHAUN FLORES

TARGET YEAR GROUP: WHOLE SCHOOL

Supporting young people with OCD: a personal perspective

It has been positive to see significant strides being made in the understanding of neurodiversity such as ADHD and Autism in education. Unfortunately, the same cannot always be said for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) which remains often over-looked. We urgently need better OCD education and support in schools, colleges and universities. My own lived experience of OCD and ADHD is central to the work I do as an educator, consultant and workshop facilitator: I want to help those who feel that their voice isn't heard and who don't feel understood. These are the questions from students that resonate when I meet and speak with them about OCD: **why are we not given this information, and taught about OCD, sooner? Why was there no-one to help us in classrooms?** This isn't to criticise teachers: when I speak to them, many don't know how best to help these students. That's why I feel that we need a better and more comprehensive education about what OCD is and how it can be impacting on students' learning, including how to train educators to notice OCD symptoms.

WHAT OCD IS (AND WHAT IT ISN'T)

The mental illness that is often presented as obsessions with symmetry, order and cleaning is a devastating illness that can ruin lives. OCD is characterised by unwanted, repetitive thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive actions (compulsions).

- Obsessions are constant, intrusive thoughts, urges, impulses or images that can be incredibly upsetting and often interrupt daily life. These thoughts are often driven by fears related to threats.
- Compulsions are the urges or responses to the obsessions that are repeated in order to assuage the fears. These can be outward, visible behaviours, or hidden, mental acts.

For example, in my own case of OCD I was terrified of harming others (obsession), and as a result I would avoid being around others, lock myself away and refuse to touch anything that I felt could bring harm to someone (compulsions). According to research, between one-third and two-thirds of adults with OCD said that they experienced the symptoms first in childhood.¹

THE IMPACT OF UNDIAGNOSED OCD

Children with OCD often experience learning and memory problems. Typically, they are physically and mentally exhausted by managing their obsessions and compulsions, which impacts on their cognitive capability. For some students with more extreme presentations of OCD, they may avoid school altogether. Research has consistently shown that the education system is failing to help students with OCD, and that delay in diagnosis and treatment is alarming. According to the IOCDF (International OCD Foundation) **“on average, individuals wait 14-17 years from symptom onset to receive an effective diagnosis and treatment.”**² This protracted suffering is compounded by the fact that OCD frequently co-exists with other neurodevelopmental conditions such as Autism and ADHD.³

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

That’s why it’s so important that, given the system’s failing, teachers in the classroom are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support students as best they can. Here are some accommodations that I would recommend for students with an OCD diagnosis, or who are suspected to have OCD. I know many of these will already be in place.

- **Empathy and compassion** – Experiences of OCD, including my own, often carry deep shame and embarrassment, so it’s vital that we take a non-judgemental approach to avoid adding to that shame. Active listening can be incredibly helpful, as well as explaining the common nature of intrusive thoughts so that students don’t feel alone. Avoidance behaviours are a common symptom of OCD, and this can often look like disengagement with learning: staff should be mindful that this is often an unintentional outward presentation of an internal coping strategy.
- **Quiet spaces** – Obsessions and compulsions can quickly become overwhelming. Ensure that students have access to a quiet place where they can regulate, reset and come back to class, with clear policies in place so that students don’t feel singled out.
- **Flexible deadlines** – Unfortunately, deadlines can cause anxiety for students and that anxiety can be especially extreme for young people with OCD as their internal world is so loud, and the obsessions and compulsions can be exacerbated by heightened anxiety. This in turn can impact on mental space, concentration and the completion of tasks. Flexibility is not about having no accountability, it’s about making accommodations so students can avoid overwhelm during a flare of symptoms.
- **Peer mentoring/group work** – You can’t overestimate the power of lived experience. The stigma that still surrounds OCD can make people feel incredibly alone. Where possible, allowing students to share their experiences of OCD with each other in a safe and nurturing way can go a long way to alleviating that.
- **OCD awareness CPD sessions** – Investing in training around OCD awareness is crucial: we need all staff, not just SENDCos, to be aware of how OCD may impact learning and what support students may need. We need to widen awareness of OCD across our schools and colleges. OCD awareness week is 13th – 19th October. It is often not as visibly celebrated as other awareness weeks in schools.
- **Working with parents** – Similarly, training for parents so that they can both improve their understanding of OCD and how it may be affecting their child, and so that they can feed back their own experiences and insights of supporting their child to the school, is really important.

I believe by bringing on board these suggestions we will be better equipped to help young people with OCD thrive in school and in life.

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ABOUT SHAUN FLORES

Shaun is an educator, consultant and facilitator working with schools on OCD, neurodiversity and masculinity.

You can hear more about Shaun’s experiences with OCD in his TedX Talks:

OCD: The brutality of a misunderstood illness.

The urgency of early intervention: transforming lives with OCD.





TRANSITION BETWEEN PHASES OF EDUCATION







BY EDUCAKE

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KEY STAGE 3

Smooth transitions: how subject teachers can support SEND students moving to secondary school

WHY TRANSITIONS MATTER FOR SEND LEARNERS

For any pupil, moving from primary to secondary school can feel like stepping into the unknown. But for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), this leap can be particularly complex.

The significant differences in the size, noise levels and teaching approaches at secondary school when compared to primary school can affect learners with additional needs more acutely. Students go from one class teacher to **“about 10 different teachers within a week. And that might come with multiple platforms for setting homework”** (Nicole El Sayed, KS3 English Coordinator at Chace Community School).

Amelia Riis, KS3 Science Coordinator at Warden Park Academy, highlights the number of adults a student comes into contact with, and their different teaching styles, as particularly exhausting for learners with SEND: **“At primary school a student with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) might have had a one-to-one Teaching Assistant (TA), but this is less likely in secondary school, which can pose challenges for the student.”**

There are challenges for teaching staff too. With an already demanding workload, dealing with the specific needs of individual students can leave teachers feeling uncertain: **“A lot of classroom teachers in secondary school don’t have enough training, but we have to adapt our lessons for things like ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, or students with all kinds of processing needs”** (Alexandra Sweetlove, KS3 English Coordinator at St Bede’s School).

WHAT WORKS IN SEND TRANSITIONS?

BEYOND THE TRANSITION DAY

Some schools introduce 'bridging projects' where Year 6 students work with secondary teachers on curriculum-linked activities before the summer holidays. Charles Horner's science department at Hitchin Girls' School has a primary school link teacher:

“In Year 6, our primary liaison will start visiting the feeder schools in September or October. He'll go in for a morning and deliver different scientific ideas and bring in equipment, for example if he's doing a lesson on electricity.”

St Bede's English department takes a similar approach; KS3 Coordinator Alexandra Sweetlove says:

“I've gone in as a secondary school English teacher and taught Year 6 English to try and give the students an idea of what an English lesson would be like in secondary school. That's good for both learners with SEND and all the pupils.”

Inviting students into the new departments can help alleviate some of the students' fears. At Warden Park Academy students have hands-on taster science lessons to create enthusiasm. Amelia Riis, KS3 Science Coordinator and Transition Lead, comments that students love the practical lab work, **“especially if they can meet their future science teacher.”** These initiatives can help build academic confidence and reduce fear of the unknown.

DATA AS A COMPASS, NOT JUST A RECORD

Schools using data proactively tend to manage transitions more effectively. Tracking attendance, engagement, and pastoral concerns can highlight students at risk of struggling. But quantitative data should be combined with qualitative insights – from student voice, staff observations, and family feedback. Sharples School gathers parental input for pupil passports and student input when the students start, asking them **“What works for you?”** The team regularly consult the teachers and find that TAs are well placed to contribute information about how a child is coping.

Student passports are a vital resource for subject teachers to meet the needs of the individual. English teacher Alexandra Sweetlove at St Bede's agrees: **“it's all about prior data and having the information from our feeder schools.”**

HOW SUBJECT TEACHERS CAN SUPPORT TRANSITION

Science departments identify the issue of the “huge discrepancy” in the amount of science learning in primary school as a challenge for teachers ensuring smooth transition into Year 7. Having access to key information about their new students can help science teachers tailor their lessons to be inclusive to all. Because Amelia Riis knows the reading ages of her new pupils, she can tailor the wording of questions:

“If I've got a student in Year 7 with a considerably lower reading age, they do the exact same science content as the rest of the class, but I may change the wording of the question for them so that it's more accessible and they're not locked out of the work.”

She also uses the information she has about her learners' needs to help the lesson run smoothly. This includes supporting learners who struggle with in-lesson transitions between practical work and individual work with “Now-Next” signposting; and arranging groups ahead of time to support students who struggle to find people to work with.

The science team at Sharples School have found students with SEND often enjoy lessons because of the practical aspects: **“Science can definitely speak to certain learners that might struggle in English and maths.”**

English teacher Nicole El Sayed is aware that there can also be large ability gaps in Year 7 English cohorts, and teachers recognise that some students may find being asked to read aloud uncomfortable. It can take time to identify additional needs such as dyslexia: **“Sometimes it can take a while for the true level of their needs to present itself.”**

Alexandra Sweetlove's English department conducts baseline tests of the new students and supports those who need it with an additional literacy unit: **“The more information we have in English, the more we can identify the students that need interventions.”**



WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM REAL EXPERIENCES

Standard transition days – large, one-off visits in the summer term – can be counterproductive for some students, particularly those with sensory sensitivities or anxiety. Phased, low-stimulus visits can be far more effective. Videos introducing key staff, quiet tours outside regular hours, or short drop-in sessions can provide gentle familiarity.

At Sharples School, students with an EHCP and SEND support needs are invited to a smaller pre-transition day which enables the staff to get to know them and gives the students the opportunity to be the “experts” on the school ahead of the main transition event. As Sarah Booth explains, the children **“already know all the answers; they’ve been around the site and they can be the experts in the room rather than being the most scared and the most daunted by the whole experience.”** TAs who attended the transition events are in school on the Year 7 students’ first day as another familiar face.

The relationship with feeder primaries is key to building relationships and gathering accurate information about learners’ needs. At Sharples School, the SEND team **“highlight any pupils that we feel require an additional visit and we’ll try our best... There was one girl who really required extra support, so we went in to see her specifically”** (Sarah Booth).

At Warden Park Academy, the Whole School Transition Lead Angie Whyte asks the primary teachers to complete passports for students with EHCPs and students with SEND so they are ready for new secondary teachers from the start of the new academic year.

Centring the voice of the student is key to avoid relying on out-of-date information or pre-judging a child’s ability to cope with transition. Sarah Booth asserts, **“You don’t want judgments before that child has walked in.”** The SEND staff there often find that what a child needed at primary is different to what they need at secondary. Lucie Melmoth, KS3 Science Coordinator at Sharples, makes the point that not all students with additional needs will require a lot of extra support as **“it might even hinder their transition if they’re worrying about it for even longer.”**

Engagement with the child’s wider family can be instrumental in smoothing transition, with parental input on pupil passports an important part of many schools’ transition procedures. At Warden Park Academy learners work collaboratively with a named teacher and their family to create personalised passports documenting their needs. Teachers can review the passports of the Year 7s in their class and can **“already have that factored into lessons to try and help them feel settled as quickly as possible”** (Amelia Riis).

NEXT STEPS

BUILDING A BETTER TRANSITION CULTURE

Looking ahead, what can schools and Trusts do to improve transitions for SEND students?

- 1. Formalise a SEND transition framework** This might include a shared transition timeline across partner primaries and secondaries, clear expectations for EHCP information sharing, and agreed minimum contact with families.
- 2. Build staff confidence** Many secondary staff still report low confidence in supporting SEND pupils – especially those with hidden disabilities.
- 3. Phased transition models** Quiet tours, targeted drop-ins, and early summer visits have proven benefits.
- 4. Prioritise student voice** Co-produced one-page passports can dramatically improve outcomes.

Ultimately, successful transitions are not just about moving schools – they’re about building continuity, trust, and a sense of belonging for every SEND learner.

The Educake Team

EDUCAKE WISHES TO THANK THE FOLLOWING TEACHERS FOR THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nicole El Sayed, KS3 English Coordinator at **CHACE COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

Amelia Riis, KS3 Science Coordinator at **WARDEN PARK ACADEMY**

Alexandra Sweetlove, KS3 English Coordinator at **ST BEDE’S SCHOOL**

Charles Horner, Head of Science at **HITCHIN GIRLS’ SCHOOL**

Lucie Melmoth, KS3 Science Coordinator at **SHARPLES SCHOOL**

Sarah Booth, Science Teacher and Assistant SENCO at **SHARPLES SCHOOL**

“Engagement with the child’s wider family can be instrumental in smoothing transition, with parental input on pupil passports an important part of many schools’ transition procedures.”



ABOUT EDUCAKE

Educake is an award-winning online platform for retrieval practice and revision in primary and secondary schools. With over 100,000 specification-matched questions written by subject experts, Educake simplifies classwork and homework by providing automatically marked quizzes and detailed performance analysis. Teachers can quickly assess understanding, identify learning gaps, and refine their teaching, while students benefit from regular practice and self-motivated revision. Educake could be just the addition your school needs – try it for free and see what you think at www.educake.co.uk/pixl. PiXL schools receive a 10% discount on Educake.



Educake





GIFFORD PRIMARY SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: YEAR 5-6

High School Readiness: preparing for independence and success

CONTEXT

Gifford Primary School is a large, multicultural school located in a significantly deprived area of London, with eligibility for Pupil Premium funding well above the national average. Like many schools across the country, we are experiencing a noticeable increase in the number of pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), particularly those with more complex profiles. As the demand for tailored support rises, projects like this one have become not only relevant but essential.

INTENT: WHY THIS PROJECT WAS NECESSARY

Transition to secondary school is a critical juncture for all pupils, but for many with additional needs, it brings heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty. Informal support had long existed at Gifford to help SEND learners manage the move, but this academic year we sought to design and deliver a more structured, proactive approach - one that built confidence, independence, and real-world skills, while reducing the fear and apprehension that many pupils face during this time.

The core aim was to equip children with the academic foundations and life skills needed to feel genuinely “high school ready.” The project focused on a small, targeted group of around 20 children in Years 5 and 6. The numbers vary slightly year on year depending on need, but this year’s cohort reflected a representative mix of children for whom transition could have been a significant challenge. Our goal was to standardise and strengthen our approach, not only in what we offered, but in how we worked with parents, staff, and secondary partners. Research supports the importance of targeted and personalised transition programmes. McIntyre et al. (2010) emphasise that **“practical preparation, confidence-building, and relationship continuity”** are key to reducing anxiety and ensuring pupils with SEND feel secure in the change ahead.¹

IMPLEMENTATION: HOW THE PROJECT WAS DELIVERED

The project was overseen by the Assistant Headteacher and delivered by a wider team comprising the SEND department, Year 6 teachers, learning assistants, and pastoral staff. A collaborative model allowed different members of staff to support individual children based on their specific needs and the staff’s relevant experience.

The programme was structured around three main pillars:

ACADEMIC PREPARATION WITH REAL-WORLD RELEVANCE

Small-group sessions focused on English and Maths, but with functional, everyday applications. Reading activities included interpreting signage, transport maps, and simple instructions. In maths, pupils worked on time-telling (including understanding elapsed time), money management, and basic budgeting through activities such as simulated shopping tasks. These tasks were designed to mirror the practical challenges pupils might face independently in secondary school.

INDEPENDENCE AND LIFE SKILLS

Children practised skills such as following a timetable, managing belongings, and organising their time. One key feature was travel training – where children rehearsed walking routes and public transport journeys, supported by staff where needed. Role-play sessions helped pupils build confidence in common social interactions, such as asking for directions, entering a new classroom, or speaking to unfamiliar adults.

EMOTIONAL READINESS AND PARENT PARTNERSHIP

SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) work ran throughout, often via structured workshops or informal group discussion. Children explored their feelings about transition, learned emotional regulation strategies, and rehearsed potential worries through guided scenarios. Assemblies led by staff from local high schools were held, giving children the opportunity to hear directly from Year 7 teachers and support teams. Former Gifford pupils also returned to share their experiences and answer questions, offering valuable peer reassurance. Parallel workshops for parents provided clarity on the transition process, helped them understand how to support at home, and allowed them to ask questions and share concerns.

To support familiarity, additional visits were arranged with local secondary schools. Staff liaised with receiving schools to provide key information, such as school layouts, daily routines, and staff introductions. Attempts were also made to begin standardising the transition process for SEND learners across the borough – a longer-term ambition that this project has helped to initiate.

“At the start of the process, over 90% of the group reported feeling ‘worried’, ‘anxious’, or ‘scared’ about the prospect of moving to secondary school.”



IMPACT: FINDINGS, EVALUATION AND REFLECTION

The project, now completed for the 2024–25 academic year, has had a significant impact on the pupils involved. At the start of the process, over 90% of the group reported feeling “worried,” “anxious,” or “scared” about the prospect of moving to secondary school. By the end of the programme, the same proportion now describe themselves as feeling “calm,” “ready,” and “confident.” Children are demonstrably more secure in their understanding of what secondary school will entail and feel better prepared to handle the change.

Confidence levels were visibly higher during transition visits, with pupils navigating new environments and engaging with staff with greater ease than previously seen. Staff also observed increased self-regulation, stronger peer collaboration, and improved ability to apply functional skills in real-world tasks.

While formal academic measures weren’t the primary focus of this project, notable gains were seen in engagement, particularly in English sessions where content was meaningfully linked to life skills. Feedback from parents has been positive, with many expressing gratitude for the tailored support and noting that their child’s anxiety about the move had decreased significantly.

The emotional impact was also significant. A parent of one Year 6 child shared:

“My son was worried and nervous about high school, which made me feel anxious too. Gifford arranged additional transition days and visits, which really helped. He’s now looking forward to starting, and he feels calm and confident – and so do I.”

The collaborative, team-led structure ensured that each pupil received a personalised package of support. Importantly, the project also fostered stronger relationships across teams and highlighted the value of a consistent, school-wide transition offer.

NEXT STEPS

The success of this project has highlighted the importance of structured, practical and consistent support for SEND learners during the transition to secondary school. The next phase of this work focuses on contributing to a more standardised approach across our local authority. Gifford Primary School is now part of a borough-wide working party aimed at developing a unified model for SEND transition support, ensuring that all children – regardless of their primary setting – receive consistent, high-quality preparation for secondary education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools considering a similar approach should begin with a small, defined group and prioritise practical, relevant learning. Even modest interventions – such as rehearsing bus routes or role-playing classroom routines – can have a substantial impact. Regular parental involvement and a strong staff network are also essential. Building familiarity and reducing fear is not about adding more content, but about making the transition feel achievable and known.

Will Lock

**ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER, TEACHING & LEARNING LEAD
GIFFORD PRIMARY SCHOOL**

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“Importantly, the project also fostered stronger relationships across teams and highlighted the value of a consistent, school-wide transition offer.”



ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Gifford Primary School identified a clearly defined group of pupils in Years 5 and 6 to receive targeted, personalised support. Could there be similar priorities in your school or setting for identifying the specific learners for whom transition poses the biggest risk, and are your criteria transparent, fair, and revisited termly? The cohort at Gifford school reflected varied needs; support addressed financial and cultural barriers to independence. Would it also be helpful to audit potential barriers such as cost of travel cards, uniform, or digital access for students in your school - and to plan equitable solutions with families?
- Pupils rehearsed real interactions: asking for help, entering new rooms, speaking to unfamiliar adults. Which social situations most unsettle your pupils? When and where could they rehearse them safely before they meet them for real?
- The aim was to develop confidence, independence and real-world readiness. How are young people prepared for being 'next-step or future-ready' in your school or context - for example in their confidence, self-management or functional skills - and how would you know they are ready for the next stage of learning or life?
- The school has been working towards a shared local offer, working with the Local Authority to standardise SEND transition. Could there be further opportunities for your school or setting to collaborate with your local partners, and what one practice could you align (e.g., data handover, extra visits, key worker model) that would enable young people to gain a consistent experience?

GIFFORD PRIMARY SCHOOL



REGION
London

911

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
EYFS-Year 6



BOYS
51%



PP
37%



SEND
19%



KEPIER SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS3

The 'bridging year': how getting Year 7 transition right supports meaningful inclusion

RATIONALE

Over the past few years we have noticed a rise in the number of children and young people (CYP) joining us from primary school who have additional needs. Many of these CYP have increasingly complex barriers to learning – specifically, we have seen a dramatic rise in the number of CYP with a diagnosis of Autism. Reflecting on our transition programme, it was clear that a series of visits during the summer term in Year 6 was not enough to ensure our CYP, or their parents, felt happy and confident that they would have a positive experience (SEND review: right support, right place, right time, 2023).¹

To gain a better insight into where our transition procedures fell down, we met with CYP who were in Year 7 and 8 with additional needs in our school, as well as parents and carer groups across the city. This highlighted to us that many CYP and parents struggled with the jump from primary school where they were often in a class of under 25, to a year group of 240+. Parents voiced concerns that their child would be lost or swamped in such a large secondary school and that their child's individual needs would not be able to be met. Essentially many parents were concerned that the 'wraparound care' that primary schools can give wouldn't be replicated in a secondary school. Speaking to parents and CYP in older year groups, it appeared there was a general agreement that there was such a relentless focus on academic progress that wider personal development had been put to one side.

AIM

The aim of the project was to create a 'bridging year' for Year 7 where we would launch a series of initiatives throughout Year 7 to provide ongoing holistic support that would help overcome the huge jump from primary to secondary school.

THE JOURNEY

FIRST STEPS

The initial step in all of this was to completely rethink the structure of the SEN department. The existing department structure was set up to support CYP with in-class learning support. The model we wanted to move to would shift the role of the 'in-class' learning support team to an 'out-of-class' holistic model. This would allow our support staff to be attached to a singular year group, as opposed to a singular child within a classroom setting. This would also allow our assigned learning support team to become responsible for getting to know all of the CYP in their care as individuals, mentoring them and supporting them so that they are confident and happy in school. To compensate for the withdrawal of in-class support, we made a commitment as a Senior Leadership Team to invest in professional development time for teaching staff to ensure they were able to meet the needs of the CYP in their classes. This programme targeted specific barriers to learning identified by staff themselves as priority areas: working memory, cognitive overload, processing speed and, more widely, an adaptive teaching approach.

SUMMER TERM (YEAR 6)

The project started initially in the summer term of 2024. A designated learning support person was assigned to our incoming Year 6 cohort. They worked closely with the Deputy SENCO to ensure that each feeder primary school was visited so we could collect as much information about each individual learner as possible. Additional transition visits in small groups and 1:1 were then held throughout the summer term, always with the same link learning support person so that both parents and CYP could build a close relationship. This was vital in gaining the trust and confidence of both parents and CYP. To further support our new Year 7 cohort we redesigned the quiet, safe space that the learners could access when they felt they needed some additional support.

AUTUMN TERM (YEAR 7)

On the first day of school in September, the link learning support person for Year 7 went around all form groups and picked up every learner to say hello and check they were ok. The positive feedback from parents and CYP about this was overwhelming, and evidence of the success the programme had in ensuring a positive start. Additionally, our fantastic learning support person set up ClassCharts messaging with all the parents, allowing them to contact her directly during the school day if anything was worrying them. This gave parents the reassurance they needed that they could speak to someone quickly about small concerns. The impact of this was huge as it meant we could stop little concerns and worries becoming much larger issues. The previous model wouldn't have allowed for such rapid response or such a personalised experience as all calls and emails would go to the SENCO, who was not able to respond so swiftly.

By the end of the first term, we realised that some of the CYP in our SEN cohort were not achieving the positive outcomes academically that other CYP in their year group were. To address this, we spoke to the parents of our SEN cohort and asked them what they valued as success for their child in school. We put together all of their suggestions and came up with our own version of the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. CYP would try and complete tasks around school, talking to new people, trying new clubs, and would have each task signed off by a member of staff. Once they completed all the 'Bronze' tasks they were given a certificate in assembly and moved onto the Silver award scheme. This allowed us to promote success in a range of skills outside of the classroom, that crucially had been identified by parents as being things that they valued their child developing. The impact on attendance of this cohort and their general wellbeing (as seen through the Cambridge Wellbeing Checks) was really positive. Learner voice surveys also evidence the value that the learners put on completing the challenges.

We have always valued the development of social skills in our CYP and value the importance of them developing their independence along their pathway to adulthood. To ensure CYP received a high-quality experience throughout the year we decided to use some of the PiXL resources and write our own social skills/pathway to adulthood curriculum. This was delivered after school and during intervention sessions to specific CYP who we, and parents, felt would benefit from extra support in adapting to life in a large secondary school. The curriculum was designed to build on social skills that would hopefully develop the confidence of the CYP, allowing them to more fully immerse themselves in the life of the school. Mapping this curriculum allowed us to deliver a consistent programme.

To make the programme more meaningful we wanted something that would allow CYP to experience a reward for completing all the units. Writing our own AQA Unit award scheme units allowed us to give CYP certificates after they successfully completed each unit, which gave them a real feeling of success. CYP were presented with certificates throughout the year by the Headteacher which further helped enhance their feeling of success in school. Learner voice surveys show how much the CYP value their certificates.



SPRING TERM (YEAR 7)

Moving into the spring term, we felt there were ways in which we could further enhance the support we were giving to our new Year 7 SEN cohort. To that end, we developed a mentoring programme in school where Year 10 CYP mentor and support the new CYP coming into our school in the next academic year. This saw Year 9 CYP apply online to become a mentor/buddy to new SEN Year 7 CYP when they transitioned from primary school in the next academic year. All of our Year 9 applicants were interviewed and then given training around the skills a mentor needs, including safeguarding training prior to the CYP joining our school, which meant they were prepared and understood their roles as mentors when they started the programme in Year 10. After training, they were then matched with a mentee who they would meet with weekly in the new academic year. At these meetings, the mentors would have a pre-made booklet to work through with their mentees, with themes that would help them settle into secondary life and understand how to build relationships, resilience, organisational skills and independence.

The impact of the programme in terms of attendance and wellbeing has been huge for the CYP in Year 7. Many have enjoyed and valued the mentoring programme so much that they will stay on during Year 8. As a result of this, we developed a group of 'Mini Ambassadors' to support our 'Inclusion Ambassadors' who are working across the city developing an Inclusion Ambassador programme with the local authority for all secondary schools. Our Ambassadors also help support the mentoring program throughout the week and work across the school to gain learner voice and feedback on our SEN provision. This has allowed them to create learner-friendly versions of our SEN vision and intent, as well as their own version of what inclusion means to them in school.

OVERALL IMPACT

The impact of the programme has been extremely positive. The aim was to ensure that CYP with additional needs felt happy and secure in school. We reasoned that if this was the case, their attendance would be higher, they would be in lessons more, and they would therefore be exposed to more regular high-quality teaching. Parental surveys after parents' evening showed 100% satisfaction with support, and our named learning support member of staff was singled out by many parents for the support she gave. Attendance figures for learners with additional needs were higher in Year 7 than any other year group in autumn and spring term, and were higher than the previous Year 7 cohort (2023-24). The other aim was to ensure that we sent a clear message to parents that we valued each child as an individual who was on their own pathway to adulthood, and that they could be confident in the support we would offer their CYP. Parental surveys overwhelmingly confirmed this.

“I was nervous that my son would struggle at secondary school. Seeing the happy and confident boy he has become makes me so proud.”

NEXT STEPS

What the project has shown us is that there is a real need for secondary schools to consider how big the jump for some CYP with additional needs is. For CYP with additional needs, the size of a secondary school building, the number of CYP in each year group, the number of transitions, and the general hustle and bustle of a secondary school can be overwhelming. This project has shown us that by providing a holistic package of support we can reassure both parents/carers and young people that secondary school isn't something to be frightened of and that they can make the transition knowing they will be supported in all aspects of their school experience from Day 1 to Day 190.

Danny Kilkenny

DEPUTY HEADTEACHER, SENDCo
KEPIER SCHOOL

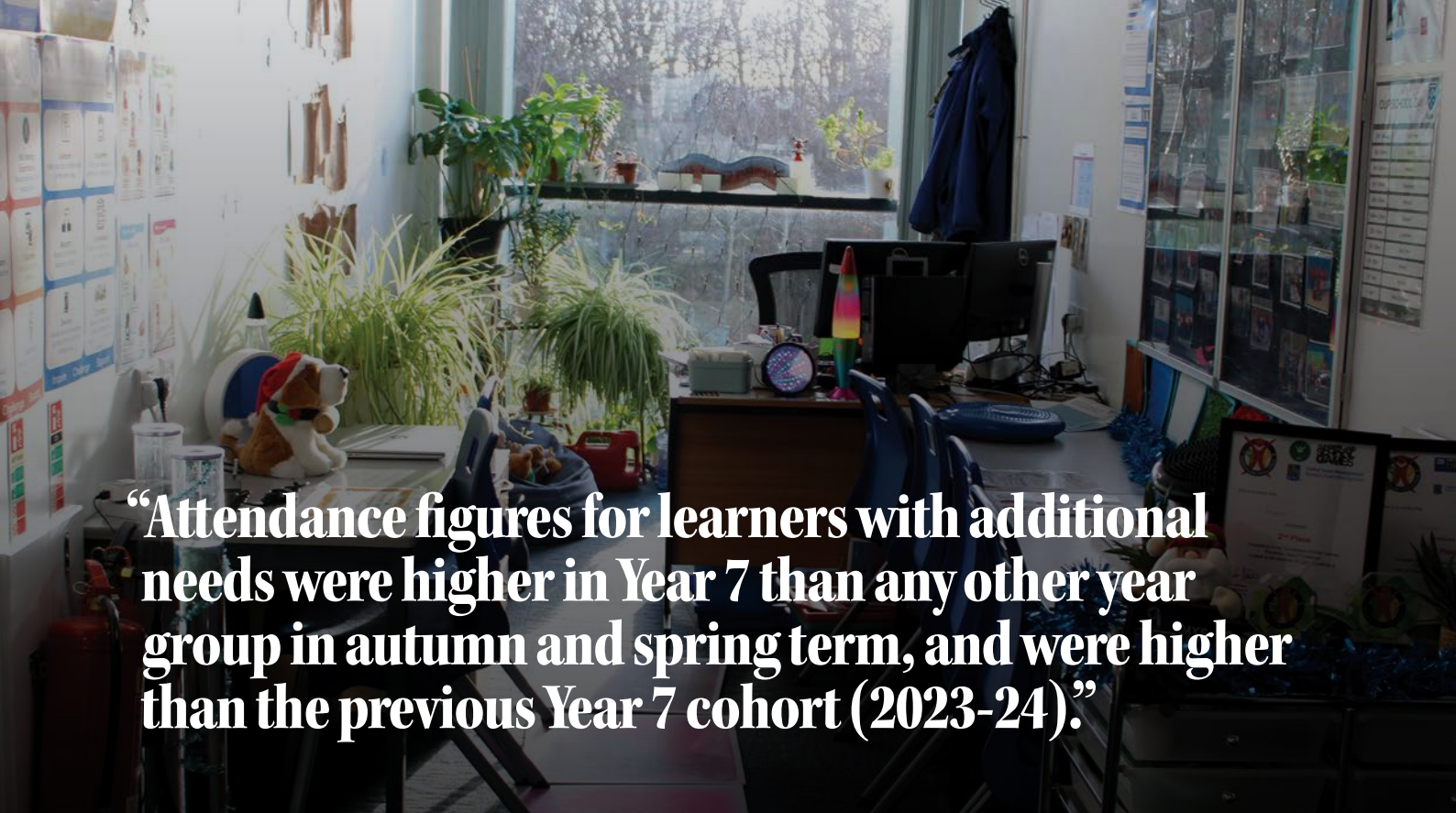
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“Attendance figures for learners with additional needs were higher in Year 7 than any other year group in autumn and spring term, and were higher than the previous Year 7 cohort (2023-24).”

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Danny has described how a bespoke award scheme, co-designed with parents, recognised achievements in confidence, independence, and social skills – celebrating wider success, not only academic outcomes. How could you celebrate success in broader life skills so that all students feel valued and motivated?
- Year 7 was identified as a bridging year, as a transitional phase, with targeted initiatives to support personal development as well as academic success. In your setting, could specific years or phases be treated as a distinct stage with dedicated structures to help children and young people transition smoothly?
- Kepier School developed peer mentoring and ambassadorship by training older pupils as mentors who helped Year 7s to settle, build resilience and grow independence. Could there be similar benefits for harnessing the influence of older pupils to provide structured, supportive mentoring for those struggling to adjust in your school or setting?
- ClassCharts messaging and regular check-ins gave parents direct access to staff, reducing anxiety and building confidence. How do you currently reassure parents during transition – and could communication systems be made more personal and responsive?

KEPIER SCHOOL



REGION
Sunderland

1140

NUMBER ON ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7 – Year 11



BOYS
50.6%



PP
38.1%



SEND
19%



HPA (KS3)
28.6%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Kepier is a large secondary school in Sunderland, and is part of Eden Learning Trust. Kepier serves the resilient community of Houghton-le-Spring, shaped by its coal mining past and the social and economic challenges that remain today. As part of Eden Learning Trust, we are dedicated to providing an ambitious, inclusive education that empowers every learner to overcome barriers, achieve their potential, and contribute positively to modern Britain.



NORTHFLEET TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS5

Relational approaches to transition into and out of Sixth Form for learners with SEND

CONTEXT

Northfleet Technology College offers a wide range of level 3 vocational qualifications in sixth form, as well as the International Baccalaureate Career-related programme. There are only five sixth forms in the area that offer level 2 courses. Our college acts as a bridge providing a greater level of pastoral support than a college can. Often students with SEND come to NTC for a one-year level 2 course during which time the Sixth Form is helping them get ready for their next steps. This article shares just some of the ways we approach transition into and out of our Sixth Form for our learners with SEND.

IMPORTANCE OF GETTING UPSTREAM ON TRANSITION

We know that many students – not just those with SEND – struggle with the step up to KS5 study. This can be more acute for learners with additional needs. It is a core part of practice at Northfleet that we get to know our students as well – and as early – as possible, so that we can understand best how we can support a smooth transition into Sixth Form. The Sixth Form is constantly looking for how their recruitment, application and enrolment processes can be made more SEND-friendly. This includes thinking about how and when information is disseminated, and how expectations are set with students so that they understand how Sixth Form will be different to KS4.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Our Sixth Form team and the SEND team in the lower school meet every month to discuss the current Year 11 students who will be coming to the Sixth Form. Regular communication allows both teams to deepen their understanding of the students: the Sixth Form team are better able to understand how to adapt to best support our incoming cohort, and the SEND team gains a deeper understanding of how the Sixth Form works enabling them to better advise students as they make their KS5 choices.

We also focus on building relationships with our other providers. Often we can work in silos as Sixth Forms, but we want other KS5 providers to understand what we offer at NTC so that if they have students that might be better suited to our Sixth Form, they are able to signpost to us and vice versa.

“It’s really important to the team that students feel like an equal partner in conversations about their transition and progress.”

STUDENT-LED AND STRENGTHS-BASED

Despite good intentions, we know that student information is not always transferred quickly or easily between institutions during transition. The Sixth Form team send a SEND questionnaire directly to students for them to fill out with their parents, so that we have an electronic record of what students need from us before they arrive. That way we aren’t relying on paperwork arriving on time, and we’re giving students and their families the agency to tell us how we can best support their transition. It’s really important to the team that students feel like an equal partner in conversations about their transition and progress: so often young people with SEND can feel very ‘done to’ – we treat them as the experts in themselves and let them direct the conversation about them.

The questionnaire also functions as a really useful mechanism for parents being able to share information about their child. For example, one parent wrote in the open text box at the end: **“When you speak to them, they will say that they have heard what you’ve said and that they understand. But they don’t. Please say it again.”** That is an incredibly useful insight for us that we can pass on to all our staff – and it is not necessarily something we would have got from an EHCP.

Ellie (Pastoral Lead for Post 16) meets with all SEND pupils individually prior to them entering Year 12. The conversations are led by the students and are an opportunity for them to talk about what they are excited about and looking forward to about Sixth Form, as well as anything they are nervous or worried about. It’s important to the team that they get to know the students as individuals to avoid making assumptions about how students will feel.

ANTICIPATING CHALLENGES

As part of the transition conversations that Ellie has with students, she is able to help students anticipate what might be a challenge – for example, the Sixth Form enrolment day is a really busy day with lots going on, and that can be overwhelming for some students. As part of the enrolment day, quiet spaces are identified in advance that students can use if they need some time and space to themselves. Ellie is also on hand throughout the day to help students who may be feeling nervous or anxious, and where appropriate she helps introduce students to social groups.



SECURING NEXT STEPS

A number of our students with SEND are on a one-year level 2 course, and so we need to work with them on finding their next step. We've been working over the years on cultivating stronger relationships with other providers to provide SEND taster events for a range of different courses. There can be a disconnect sometimes between how students appear on paper and what they are like in person. We also make sure those providers have the same depth of understanding of students as individuals as we do. This has led to more providers taking on students with higher levels of need than they might have done in the past.

For learners who aspire to university, we have an additional layer of conversations with them beyond the careers and HE support sessions for UCAS, so that we're thinking through what they want from university, how the process works and to get them really comfortable with what they need to do. We spoke earlier about the importance of building relationships with other providers and this extends to universities. We have found in general that universities are really receptive to hearing from us about what students need and are willing to make accommodations. Recently we had a student who didn't secure their good pass in their English re-sit and we thought that might mean they'd lose their university place, but when we spoke to the university they were really helpful and we were able to work something out so that the student could keep their place.

"THEY'RE STILL OURS UNTIL THEY'RE SETTLED"

Even after students leave us, we stay in touch until we know they are absolutely settled in the next phase of their education or life. We keep the door open for any student that needs to come back to us for support.

Lorna Newbrook

**LEARNING COACH AND STRATEGIC LEAD FOR NORTH KENT, POST 16 EDUCATION
NORTHFLEET TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ellie Norris, Pastoral Lead for Post 16

Helen Fitzgibbons, Director of Sixth Form

Jen Allen, Assistant Head SENDCo & DSL

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- The Sixth Form at Northfleet Technology College (NTC) evaluates how information is shared, when expectations are set, and how accessible key processes feel for learners with SEND. What aspects of your admissions or onboarding processes could be redesigned to reduce cognitive load and increase predictability for pupils who find large, busy or high-stakes environments overwhelming?
- The college has identified potentially overwhelming moments, such as enrolment day, and proactively plans to provide quiet spaces and adult support. Are there high-pressure moments in your calendar that could be redesigned with sensory, emotional and relational safety in mind, especially for pupils who struggle in crowded or unpredictable environments?
- NTC created calm, supported entry points to new phases by ensuring that someone familiar is always present to steady anxious students, introduce them to peers and create a sense of psychological safety. How intentionally does your setting provide relational anchors during transitions, and is there scope for additional familiar adults or safe spaces to be provided to reduce anxiety for vulnerable learners?
- Lorna has described how NTC keeps the door open after learners leave, maintaining support until the next placement is secure and successful. What mechanisms could your school adopt to stay connected beyond transition points, ensuring pupils feel held until they are settled or during their most vulnerable moments?



“We’ve been working over the years on cultivating stronger relationships with other providers to provide SEND taster events for a range of different courses.”

NORTHFLEET TECHNOLOGY COLLEGE



REGION
Kent

945

NUMBER ON
ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7 - Year 13



BOYS
99%



PP
36.5%



SEND
26.2%



HPA
7.2%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Northfleet Technology College is a Secondary Modern boys’ school within the Gravesham Borough of Kent, with a Sixth Form of 164 students. Our Sixth Form is co-educational, but the vast majority of students are male, although we are welcoming more girls year on year.



OAKS PARK HIGH SCHOOL

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS5

Supporting SEND students in Post 16

We are really proud that our school, despite being in a selective borough, is increasingly popular with families, with a growing number of first-choice applications each year - including those with higher levels of special educational or social need. Across our entire school we work exceptionally hard to provide targeted and aspirational support to meet the needs of all our learners. This article explores some of the approaches we have taken in the Sixth Form.

MEETING STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

The bedrock of our vision – to raise outcomes for all our students – has been absolutely essential to us as a Sixth Form. To achieve this, it is key that we honour the school's context. We understand that the students we cater for often need support not only with their SEND needs but also their social, mental and health care (SMHC) needs. We pride ourselves on being a small Sixth Form with small classes, where bespoke intervention and strong interpersonal relationships are crucial.

We place great emphasis on ensuring a supportive transition for students before they join the Sixth Form. Liaising closely with the Year 11 team throughout the year is vital. We offer a number of assemblies about Post 16 options, tutor-time breakfasts, and a taster day where Year 11 students experience life as a Sixth Former. At every stage, bespoke arrangements are made for students from our Autism Base and for SEND students so that they are supported by LSAs and able to fully enjoy the experience.

OUR JOURNEY

We began with the basics: developing an attendance strategy. We knew that students would be better supported if they regularly attended tutor time, so we focused on creating an engaging tutor programme to drive up attendance and strengthen the personal relationships between tutors and students. This focus on attendance is universally beneficial, but it particularly supports our SEND students, who often rely more heavily on one-to-one guidance. Additionally, we strive to get to the root cause of any absence as we often find that for our SEND students in particular absence is linked to anxiety around good performance. By ensuring that those personal relationships with tutors are built we have been able to drive attendance upwards.

The next step was to ensure that the identification and monitoring of SEND students continued to be prioritised through the Sixth Form. We follow the registers created for students in lower school, but we also make sure that during enrolment, SEND needs are discussed directly with students. More importantly, we analyse each data collection point with SEND in mind, ensuring that we investigate any potential additional needs for students who are persistently underperforming.

STRONG TEAMS

Our strong SEND department across the Cheam Academies Network Trust has a robust process of creating **Pupil Passports**, which share information about students' needs and how best to support them. These are also followed in Post 16. We meet with the SENCO and Deputy DSL twice half-termly for **Students of Concern** meetings, where we discuss students within the SEND category and any safeguarding concerns. This joined-up approach allows us to identify issues early and act collaboratively to deploy strategies that support both students and, where appropriate, their families.

We have appointed an **Academic Learning Mentor** – a role accessible to any student who needs learning support, though it is often used by our SEND students. During these sessions there is an emphasis on ensuring students know how to organise their independent work, prioritise tasks and break down revision schedules. This is of particular importance for our SEND students who often are really challenged by the independence that A level both requires and affords students. Our Academic Learning Mentor is a fantastic way to build bridges between our SEND students' independent study and teachers, often emailing teachers with concerns, questions and queries from the students as well as helping them decode teachers' instructions or the demanding textbooks.

“Our Academic Learning Mentor is a fantastic way to build bridges between our SEND students' independent study and teachers.”



Additionally, we provide specific **LSA support** for our EHCP students both in and outside of lessons. Some of our EHCP students were part of Horizon, a specialist provision within our school for children with high levels of SEND, where autism is the primary need. This extra level of support is essential for them, as they often find the increased independence of Sixth Form particularly challenging.

We also have a **designated tutor for EHCP students**, which is extended to some of our students with the most significant SEND needs. This is a vertically integrated tutor group with students from Years 12 and 13. More sensitive PSHE and RSE themes are often delivered separately by members of the Horizon team to ensure that appropriate adaptations are made to content and delivery.

NEXT STEPS

We aim to continue embedding the strategies we have implemented so far and to establish robust systems for monitoring and evaluating their impact.

Ana Walker

ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER & HEAD OF POST 16
OAKS PARK HIGH SCHOOL

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- Oaks Park prioritised relational knowledge, small-group structures and an understanding of SEND and SMHC needs as the basis for successful support. Are there any adaptations that could be made in your setting that would help to ensure that each learner's strengths, needs and emotional context are known well enough to shape daily practice?
- Specialist staff at Oaks Park deliver PSHE and RSE content in accessible, developmentally appropriate ways. Where might your PSHE/RSE curriculum (or equivalent) require adaptation to ensure that learners with specific needs are able to access sensitive or complex content with dignity and/or understanding?
- Ana has described how taster days, tailored visits and enhanced arrangements for SEND learners helped to reduce levels of anxiety and prepare students for KS5. What elements of your transition process genuinely reduce uncertainty for learners with SEND, and where might additional personalised experiences be beneficial in helping students feel safe and prepared for change?

OAKS PARK HIGH SCHOOL



REGION
Surrey

1418

NUMBER ON ROLL



YEAR GROUPS
Year 7 - Year 13



BOYS
53%



PP
30%

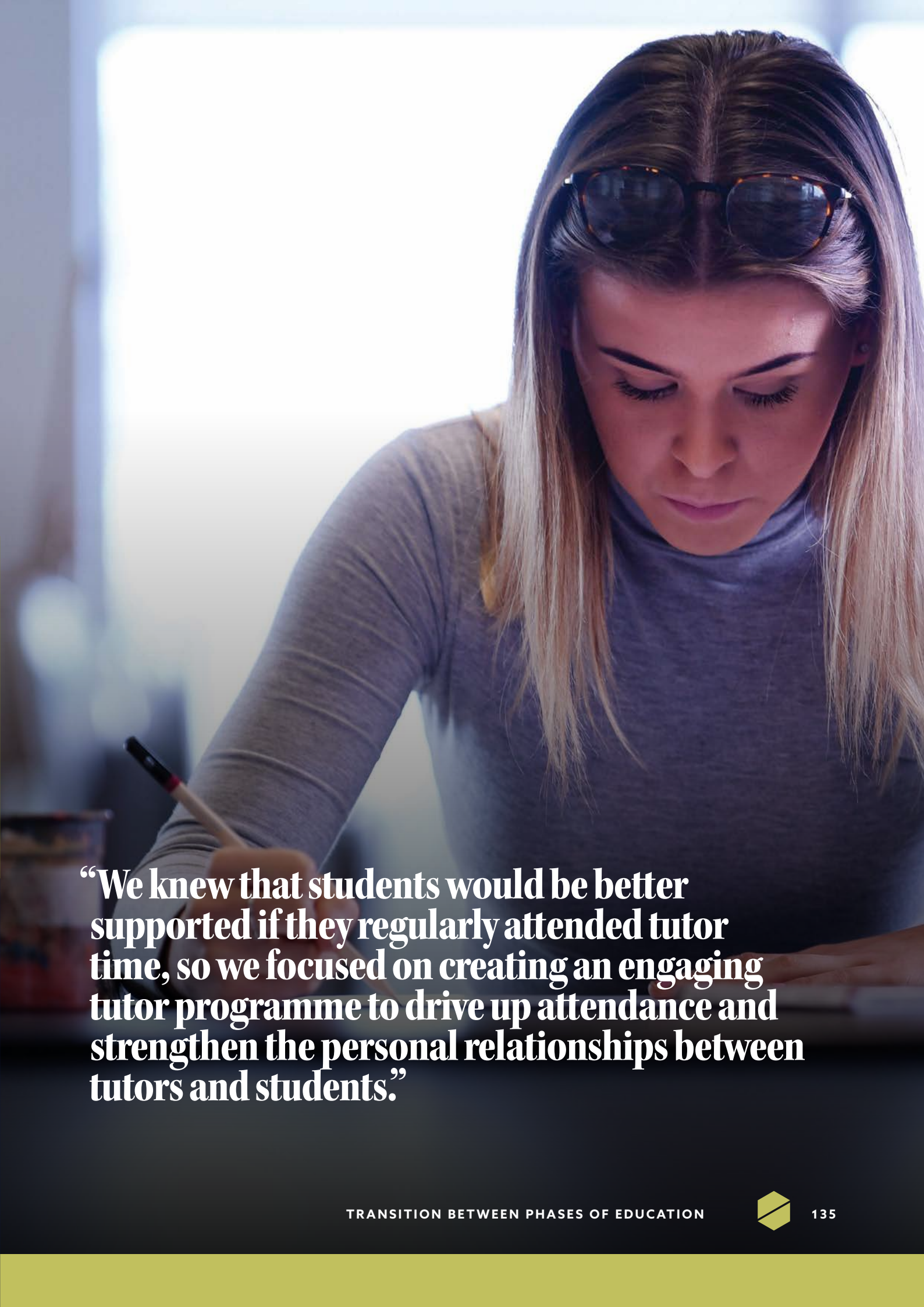


SEND
29%



HPA
20%

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION Our school is situated in the London Borough of Sutton, which has the highest rate of selection in the country. Of the fifteen secondary schools in the borough, there are five grammar schools, two high-performing faith schools, one school that selects students by aptitude, and another with a selective stream of entry. We are part of the Cheam Academies Network (CAN) Trust and have been on a sustained journey of improvement since opening in 2019.



“We knew that students would be better supported if they regularly attended tutor time, so we focused on creating an engaging tutor programme to drive up attendance and strengthen the personal relationships between tutors and students.”



BY LD TRAINING SERVICES

TARGET YEAR GROUP: KS5

Creating a legacy of belonging in Post 16 Education

WHO ARE WE?

LD Training Services Limited (LDT) has established a strong reputation for delivering high-quality qualifications that respond directly to the needs of learners. Through innovative delivery methods and a learner-centred approach, LDT ensures that every learner benefits from a well-rounded educational experience focused on employability, career progression, and personal growth. Founded in 2009 as an independent training provider, LDT is a dynamic and respected organisation within the UK's education and skills sector. LDT has supported individuals in realising their potential through a range of accredited qualifications, including Apprenticeships, BTECs, NVQs, Functional Skills, Degrees with Foundation Year, HNCs and CPD programmes.

Central to LDT's philosophy is the belief that education should be accessible, inclusive and flexible. LDT promotes lifelong learning by creating opportunities for progression and achievement at every stage of the learner journey. Each programme is designed to foster confidence, ambition and employability, ensuring that learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills to succeed in their chosen pathways. LDT's commitment to widening participation is demonstrated through its dedicated Post 16 SEND campus, which reinforces its mission to provide inclusive education for all. LDT continues to champion access to education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups, developing meaningful pathways into education, sustainable employment and professional advancement.

With campuses in Stanmore, Dudley and Nottingham, LDT's flexible and contextually responsive delivery model has proven highly effective across diverse communities. Each campus benefits from strong learner support services and an organisational culture built on LDT's core values of integrity, inclusion and excellence. The quality of its facilities further reflects LDT's dedication to providing outstanding learning environments, maintaining high standards across all campuses, ensuring that learners study in safe, inclusive and inspiring spaces that promote engagement and achievement.

ESTABLISHING LD6: THE IMPETUS FOR CHANGE

Our intent was simple but urgent: to re-imagine Post 16 education for young people with EHCPs so that every learner could thrive, progress, and feel a sense of belonging. Many of our students came to us with histories of school refusal, anxiety, or disrupted learning. Some had spent significant time out of education. In a system that can often feel transactional, LD6 was designed to be transformational. We wanted to prove that when belonging sits at the heart of a curriculum, learning becomes possible again.

Belonging, for us, is more than inclusion; it's acceptance without condition. It means recognising each learner as an individual with potential, not problems. From that foundation, everything else flows: confidence, communication, resilience, and aspiration. For some of our learners, the very act of walking through the door and staying for a full day is progress. For others, it's rediscovering the ambition to move forward, to build skills, and to see a future beyond LD6. Our aim was never to stop at stability. Belonging creates the safety to dream, and with that safety comes aspiration. LD6 therefore acts not just as a destination, but as a launchpad - a bridge to higher levels of learning and employment. This continuity offers something powerful: a pipeline of opportunity that dismantles the traditional ceiling for SEND learners. It shows them that their educational journey doesn't end with school or a single qualification – it evolves, grows, and adapts to their pace and potential. The intent behind LD6 is about building a sustainable ecosystem of learning that proves every young person, given the right environment, can aspire to and achieve more than traditional assessment methods predict. Belonging is the beginning. But progression, purpose, and pride are the legacy we hope to leave.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Turning the vision of LD6 into reality demanded far more than designing a curriculum – it required building a culture. Every decision, from the physical environment to the rhythm of the day, was made with one question in mind: Will this help our learners feel safe, valued, and ready to learn?

CREATING A NURTURING STRUCTURE

The first step was establishing a consistent, calm, and purposeful routine. Many of our learners thrive when things are predictable, so we introduced clear daily structures such as the Breakfast Club, which serve as gentle transitions into learning. These moments are about connection, a chance for learners to informally interact with staff, share thoughts, and settle emotionally before the day begins. This also models the soft skills of communication, turn-taking, and mutual respect. From there, the day flows into three interlinked strands:

- **Core Learning:** English, Maths, and Personal & Social Development delivered through contextualised, practical activities linked to everyday life and employability.
- **Vocational Studies:** Gateway Level 1 and Level 2 in selected pathways such as Business, Health and Social Care and Childcare and Travel and Tourism.
- **Independence and Community Skills:** activities focused on travel training, communication, wellbeing, and healthy living, aligned to the Preparation for Adulthood outcomes.

Learning is differentiated and multi-sensory, using visuals, project-based tasks, and collaborative learning. Where reasonable we tailor tasks to learners' specific interest to everyone, so they start to understand the relevance and application of their learning. Classrooms are intentionally calm and have a uniform layout and visual timetables to reduce anxiety along with our own Sensory Room to allow students time and space to de-compress.

COLLABORATION

The success of LD6 has been built through collaboration.

- Every learner has a 'My Way of Working and Learning Passport' – a living document updated through ongoing dialogue between staff, families, and learners themselves.
- Our Safeguarding and Quality teams played a central role in embedding compliance and ensuring that every curriculum decision aligned with the SEND Code of Practice, the Ofsted Education Inspection Framework, and the Preparation for Adulthood outcomes. Internally, regular 'Ways of Working' meetings provide safe spaces for staff to reflect, problem-solve, and stay responsive to emerging needs.
- We use data quietly but powerfully to inform practice, combining BKSB and EHCP baselines with qualitative tracking such as attendance, engagement, and softskill development through the Horsforth Quadrant. This balance allows us to celebrate progress that can't always be seen on paper – for example, the learner who joins a group discussion for the first time or travels independently to campus.



- Perhaps the most defining feature has been ensuring LD6 connects seamlessly into the wider LDT progression pipeline, by guiding our learners towards Level 3 and Higher Education pathways. Then looking to work alongside our Careers and HE teams, to make sure every transition is purposeful, so the sense of belonging at LD6 continues into the next stage of each learner's journey.

Ultimately, what has made LD6 thrive wasn't a single strategy, but a thousand small, deliberate acts of care, predictable routines, patient conversations, and shared laughter. The model proves that when compassion and structure coexist, progress follows naturally. LD6 wasn't built to fit learners into a system, but to shape a system around them and in doing so, it has quietly redefined what success can look like.

IMPACT

Although LD6 is still in its infancy, the impact of the first half term has already been both visible and deeply felt. What began as a new provision has quickly become a safe and vibrant community where learners are beginning to rebuild trust in education, in others, and in themselves.

EARLY SIGNS OF ENGAGEMENT AND BELONGING

For many of our learners, simply walking through the door on day one was an act of courage. Several had spent long periods out of formal education or carried significant anxiety from past experiences. Yet within just a few weeks, attendance has stabilised above 90%, with learners arriving earlier, joining breakfast sessions, and taking comfort in the predictability of the daily routine. The consistency of structure, paired with genuine warmth, has been transformative. Learners who initially sat in silence are now beginning to greet staff, share stories, and participate in group activities. **One student reflected,**

“I didn't think college would be for me, but I like it here because I feel calm and people listen to me.”

BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND CONNECTION

Small but powerful changes are evident across the group. Learners are initiating conversation, collaborating during vocational tasks, and beginning to self-regulate emotions with support. We have seen increased eye contact, improved attendance, and a growing sense of pride in completing work. Learners have become interested and engaged in the wider LDT community, often discussing conversations with wider LDT staff sharing a significant shift in confidence and social skills.

EMERGING DATA AND EARLY INDICATORS

Our early data gives us cautious optimism. Most learners have already achieved or are on track to meet their initial ILP and EHCP targets, particularly in communication and engagement. Attendance and punctuality remain strong, while behavioural incidents are minimal and de-escalated quickly through relational practice. Qualitative measures – such as learner and staff reflections – show growth in confidence, social interaction, and self-awareness. Learners are beginning to take ownership of personal goals, recognising their own progress and responding positively to praise.

IMPACT ON STAFF AND CULTURE

The first half term has had a profound effect on staff. The shared purpose of creating a compassionate, structured environment has united the team. Weekly reflections in our Ways of Working sessions have strengthened consistency and encouraged adaptive practice. Staff frequently comment that the sense of community at LD6 feels different – calmer, connected, and built on genuine mutual respect. **As one teacher shared,**

“It's only been a few weeks, but we already see glimpses of who these young people can become when they're given time and trust.”

SHAPING A FOUNDATION FOR PROGRESSION

While it is still early, the groundwork for progression is already being laid. Learners are beginning to explore vocational options, demonstrate curiosity about future pathways, and understand that education can open doors, not close them. For the first time, many are beginning to see themselves as learners again rather than as people who “couldn't do school.” LD6's early impact lies not in grades or outcomes, but in the quiet reawakening of potential. We have witnessed learners reconnect with learning, rediscover confidence, and begin to imagine a future beyond their EHCP. These small yet powerful shifts form the foundation on which long-term progress - academic, emotional, and social - will be built. In these first few weeks, LD6 has shown that belonging is not the end goal; it is the starting point. From that foundation of trust and safety, the potential for growth is limitless.

NEXT STEPS

As we move beyond our first half term, our next steps focus on strong foundations protecting the culture of belonging we've created while deepening learning, structure, and progression for every student.

- **STRENGTHENING ROUTINES AND INDEPENDENCE** The foundations of a calm and consistent approach have been set. Over the coming term, we will focus on supporting learners to take increasing ownership of their day from managing personal organisation to leading elements of the design of the day through student voice. This gradual responsibility will help build independence and confidence, preparing them for more autonomous learning and eventual work placements.
- **DEEPENING PERSONALISED LEARNING** We will continue to refine our curriculum around individual strengths and aspirations, striving to make sure every lesson connects meaningfully to each learner's EHCP outcomes and vocational interests.
- **PREPARING FOR PROGRESSION PATHWAYS** Our vision extends beyond LD6. Learners will begin exploring progression routes within the wider LDT framework – Supported Internships, Level 3, and eventually, Higher Education. This early exposure to the LDT pipeline reinforces the message that there is a future beyond the current stage – that LD6 is not a holding space, but a launchpad.
- **EXPANDING COLLABORATION AND SHARING PRACTICE** We plan to invite local authority partners, parents, and external agencies to observe the model in practice. This will provide opportunities to share effective strategies and strengthen our position as a trusted, high-quality SEND provider. We are also open to exploring partnerships with other PiXL member schools and FE providers to exchange good practice in inclusion, transition, and relational pedagogy.
- **SUSTAINING THE CULTURE OF BELONGING** Perhaps most importantly, our focus remains on sustaining the atmosphere that defines LD6: warmth, predictability, and high expectation delivered with compassion. As our cohort grows, so too must our commitment to knowing each learner deeply. Belonging is our constant; everything else builds from there.

Kelly Dunn
HEAD OF POST 16
LD TRAINING SERVICES LTD

Sara Green
HEAD OF QUALITY & COMPLIANCE
LD TRAINING SERVICES LTD

ADAPTING THESE IDEAS

- At LD6, calm routines, visual timetables and consistent daily rhythms reduce anxiety and prepare learners to access learning. What predictable structures in your environment reduce cognitive and emotional load for pupils, and where might greater consistency or clarity help learners who rely heavily on routine?
- LD6 uses vocational pathways, contextualised learning and independence skills to help learners discover strengths and imagine their future. In what ways does your curriculum allow pupils to see themselves as successful, capable and employable? How might you strengthen links between learning, identity and future pathways?
- Regular 'Ways of Working' meetings at LD6 allow staff to refine practice, solve problems and remain aligned. How do your teams create space for reflective dialogue, and what structures might enhance consistency, shared language and collective ownership of SEND practice?
- LD6's next steps emphasise preserving belonging while scaling provision and increasing independence. As numbers or levels of need grow in your setting, what practices must remain non-negotiable to protect your core culture, and what can evolve flexibly to meet changing demands?

LD TRAINING SERVICES LTD



REGION
Midlands & London



YEAR GROUPS
Post 16



BOYS
75%



PP
70%



SEND
100%



FIND OUT MORE





FIND OUT MORE



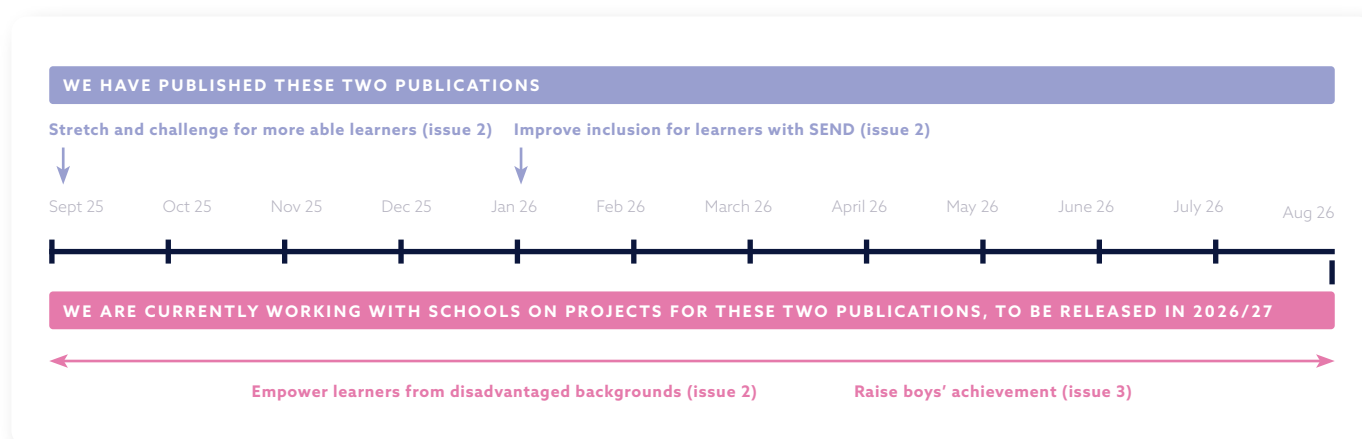
Getting involved with PiXL Insights

INSIGHTS PUBLICATIONS We produce PiXL Insights publications focused on four cohorts:



And we hope by now that you will recognise that there are no Insights publications without PiXL schools volunteering to participate and run projects in their settings!

INSIGHTS PROJECT CYCLE We run Insights projects on a two-year cycle. That means every academic year we are actively working on projects on two cohorts, while publishing the insights from the previous academic year's projects.



IN THE SUMMER TERM OF 2025/26 We will be looking to connect with schools and settings who are interested in running projects relating to more able learners and/or learners with SEND. These projects would run throughout academic year 2026/27, and would be published in the following academic year.

A reminder that projects can be:

- Run by any member of staff in a setting, as long as they have the support of SLT;
- Focused on any aspect of school life;
- Targeted at any age group from EYFS up to Post 16.

PiXL provide a structured proposal form that we ask interested schools to complete. This is not assessed in any way by PiXL – any school who wants to run a project with us is welcome to. Rather the proposal form is intended only as a way to capture the project's intent, implementation and desired impact, it forms the basis of your conversation with your project mentor and allows us to track how ideas change and develop over the course of the project.

If you are interested in finding out more, we'd love to hear from you.

BOOK A 15-, 30- OR 45-MINUTE SURGERY

with a member of our team via our PiXL portal. You should see an option for PiXL Insights in your menu of choices.

SPEAK TO YOUR PiXL SPECIALIST

about how a PiXL Insights project might support your wider work on improving outcomes.

CONTACT OUR TEAM VIA EMAIL

on insights@pixl.org.uk with any questions or to request a proposal form.

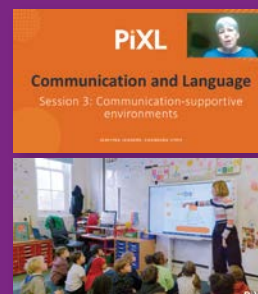
More from PiXL

Here are some of the ways that PiXL may be able to support or enhance the work you are doing. As you may know, we have a very broad offer at PiXL and so it is always worth speaking to your PiXL Specialist about what would best suit your needs.

Communication and Language CPD with Jean Gross CBE

We saw in the national picture that a significant proportion of students identified with SEND have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). We have three CPD series developed with the brilliant Jean Gross that support leaders and practitioners in building strong communication and language development for all children and young people.

The series are split by key stage focus, with separate series for EYFS, KS1/2 and KS3. The content varies slightly across the key stages, but all feature content on how we can best support students with SLCN within whole-class teaching. All series include leadership thinking guides, video CPD from Jean, as well as supporting videos of classroom practice, and accompanying workbooks.



PiXL TV

We have two series available on PiXL TV that may be of interest.

PiXL In Action

These documentary series were filmed in PiXL schools and cover a wide range of topics and areas. We have episode guides which will help you choose the best starting point for you, but readers of this publication may want to begin with these three episodes from our 'Stretch and challenge for all' series.



PiXL in Conversation

These take the form of in-depth conversations between PiXL CEO, Rachel Johnson, and an expert guest. They are designed to help you take time to think about a broad range of key issues or aspects of education. Some episodes that might be particularly of interest to readers of this publication are:

Unpacking the legacy of Covid-19 in our schools with Tony Breslin

Reaching the unseen children with Jean Gross

Unpacking inclusive education with Daniel Sobel

Getting curious about curriculum with Mick Waters

Making the invisible visible with Alex Wheatle

Creating safe and inclusive schools with Hannah Wilson

Creating cultures of belonging with Mo Wiltshire

PiXL
inConversation

Networks

At our core, we are a leadership network organisation – so connecting you with colleagues from across the membership to share is incredibly important to us. PiXL Insights is one of the ways we share practice – our online networks are another.

Our Specialist team host a wide variety of networks, which are opportunities for schools to come together and share their ideas and practice. For example, our Primary team run a regular SEND leader network, and in the past we have run networks on topics as varied as attendance, classroom talk, and closing the gender achievement gap.

You can access upcoming networks for your sector via the PiXL Portal. If you would like us to run a network on a particular topic, then please speak to your PiXL Specialist or contact the team on admin@pixl.org.uk.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

We are at the service of our member schools. If there is a way that you think PiXL could support the work you are doing, then please do reach out and let us know.

Further Reading

For adults

1. Ali, A. (2024) **A little guide for teachers: Special Educational Needs**. London: Corwin UK.
2. Benedict, A. & Braven, A. (2025) **Educating Everyone: an introduction to relational inclusion in schools**. Oxford: Routledge.
3. Bombèr, L. M. (2021) **Inside I'm hurting: practical strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in School**. Bury St Edmunds: Work Publishing.
4. Brooks, R. (2019) **The trauma and attachment-aware classroom: a practical guide**. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
5. Chaves, J. & Taylor, A. (2021) **Creating sensory smart classrooms: a practical guide for educators**. Oxford: Routledge.
6. Chowdhury, Z. (2025) **Creating belonging in the classroom**. London: Bloomsbury.
7. Durrant, G. (2021) **100 ways your child can learn through play: fun activities for young children with SEN**. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
8. Durrant, G. (2024) **SEND Strategies for the primary years: practical ideas and expert advice to use pre-diagnosis**. London: Bloomsbury.
9. Gross, J. (2022) **Reaching the unseen children: practical strategies for closing stubborn attainment gaps in disadvantaged groups**. Oxford: Routledge.
10. Kelly, K. & Phillips, S. (2022) **Teaching literacy to learners with dyslexia: a multisensory approach**. London: Corwin UK.
11. Major, L. E. & Briant, E. (2023) **Equity in education: levelling the playing field of learning**. London: John Catt.
12. Morgan, F. & Costello, E. (2023) **Square pegs: inclusivity, compassion and fitting in – A guide for schools**. Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press.
13. Myatt, M. and Tomsett, J. (2023) **SEND Huh: curriculum conversations with SEND leaders**. Woodbridge: John Catt.
14. NASEN (2020) **Teacher Handbook: SEND**. [Online]. [PDF]. Available from: <https://asset.nasen.org.uk/Teacher%20SEND%20handbook%2030th%20January%202024.pdf> [Accessed 28 November 2025]
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16. Pavey, B. (2016) **Dyslexia in early childhood: an essential guide to theory and practice**. Oxford: Routledge.
17. Rowland, M. (2017) **Learning without labels: improving outcomes for vulnerable pupils**. London: John Catt.
18. Rowland, M. (2025) **The A-Z of addressing disadvantage**. London: John Catt.
19. Smith, D. (2024) **Rooted in joy: creating a classroom culture of equity, belonging and care**. New Jersey: Jossey-Bass Publishing.
20. Sobel, D. & Alston, S. (2021) **The inclusive classroom: a new approach to differentiation**. London: Bloomsbury Education.
21. Sobel, D. (2018) **Narrowing the attainment gap: a handbook for schools**. London: Bloomsbury.
22. Steer, J. (2021) **Understanding ADHD in girls and women**. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
23. Ward, C. (2019) **On the fringes: preventing exclusions in schools through inclusive, child-centred, needs-based practice**. Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.
24. Wespieser, K. (2021) **The ResearchED Guide to Special Educational Needs: an evidence-informed guide for teachers**. London: John Catt.

For students

If you haven't come across the Inclusive Books for Children website and awards <https://inclusivebooksforchildren.org> then do check them out - it's a wonderful resource for finding children's titles for all ages that feature diverse characters, including people with SEND.

Barrington Stoke (an imprint of Harper Collins) have a great selection of dyslexia-friendly titles that are super-readable. Their website allows you to select the child's interest age and reading age to find books that are accessible and age appropriate.

Schools can arrange for free access to audiobooks for dyslexic learners and children with reading difficulties through Listening Books <https://listening-books.org.uk>.

More from PiXL

PiXL also have a series of books published by Hachette Learning and written by our CEO, Rachel Johnson. These are short, practical books aimed at supporting leaders of all levels.



Acknowledgements

As is always the case with PiXL Insights, this publication could not have happened without the individual staff members at each participating school. Their spirit of innovation and collaboration has been inspirational throughout the year. We hope they – and their students – are proud of what they have achieved. I would also like to thank the headteachers, senior leaders, and staff from these schools who have supported this work. We know that staff time is a precious and finite resource: thank you for your generosity.

The work undertaken by Insights schools is supported and guided by Gary Lobbett, our project mentor. I am incredibly grateful to Gary not only for his work with our project schools and for the article he has contributed to this publication, but for the many, many conversations we have throughout the year that are so filled with curiosity and optimism – two things you can never have too much of in education!

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