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Collaboratively developing a curriculum for learners with complex SEND needs

A trust wide approach to inclusive, adaptive curriculum design

School/Background Context

The Trust Background

The Trust is an educational trust consisting of 11 schools based in a coastal, rural location. It is made up of 11 primary schools and one secondary school. The partnership aims to provide high-quality education with a focus on creating an inclusive learning environment for all pupils. The vision statement and trust ethos emphasise the development of confident, creative, and critical thinkers who are prepared for lifelong learning.

The trust is also entering a period of change, with plans to merge with another trust to become a 36-school trust spanning a wider geographic area. The second trust consists of 24 primary schools and one secondary school, located in the same town as the other secondary school. The combined age range of the two trusts will be from 3 through to 16.

Both trusts have identified an increasing number of pupils assessed as needing a specialist placement or bespoke individualised curriculum. In response, several schools across both trusts have set up small nurture classrooms to provide specialist provision. Following the process of Trust SEND reviews, data indicated that there wasn't a consistently strong curriculum offer for pupils within the nurture classrooms, and schools could not always articulate the intent of this offer. An additional challenge identified was that key staff often lack the expertise and training to deliver a specialist curriculum.

Currently, 18.4% of pupils are on the SEN list, and 4.8% have EHCPs, which aligns with national figures. However, the challenge of changing levels of SEND needs across the trust, coupled with a lack of local special school places, has led to an increase in pupils not accessing the mainstream curriculum. In total, 26 primary pupils are accessing additional provision and an adapted curriculum. There are two classes of pupils accessing an adaptive curriculum at the secondary school.

Additionally, there are two Communication and Interaction resource bases within the two trust's, one primary and one secondary. Both bases have developed a strong approach and curriculum offer, but this has not been effectively articulated by the trust.

A local special school is keen to develop closer working relationships with a view to joining the trust at a future date and has offered to partner in this work so that pupils who may later transition to the school would experience a smoother transition. The special school is a maintained school for 192 pupils aged between 3 and 19 years. It caters at an individual level, for pupils with profound or severe learning difficulties and for pupils on the autistic spectrum. The schools also has a discrete secondary provision 'Pathways' for students with social and emotional needs related to high anxiety.



More inclusive high-quality teaching



More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting

School/Background Context (continued)

School Background

Newport Community School Primary Academy is a two-form entry primary school with a Nursery with intake from 3 years old and a Local Authority funded Communication and Interaction Resource Base (CAIRB). 19% of the schools cohort is identified as having SEN with 4.7% of all pupils have an EHCP. Over recent years, the school has seen an increase in the admission of pupils who have identified complex needs and present as not managing a mainstream classroom or curriculum. Specialised provision at Newport, outside of the CAIRB, has been developed in the form of an intervention to support a small minority of pupils with complex needs, generally with Communication and Interaction as their primary area of need. The development group has supported the shaping of the curriculum for these pupils.

Outcomes and Anticipated Impact

Trust Challenge

The trust believes that all pupils deserve the best educational offer regardless of where they are placed. The challenge will be to develop an adapted curriculum with clear intent. The project aims to develop a consistent offer to all pupils across the education sector, ensuring no pupils are disadvantaged due to a lack of specialist places.

To achieve this, we plan to work with a special school and several of our SENCOs to write a curriculum offer for SEND pupils. This will ensure clarity in the curriculum's intention, provide access for all pupils to a broad and balanced curriculum, and deliver the knowledge and skills outlined in pupils' individual EHCPs.

This will be a trust-wide project that we will trial as a pilot before rolling it out across the rest of the trust if successful. We anticipate spending the Autumn term visiting special schools and mainstream schools with a strong specialist curriculum offer and crafting our own curriculum intent. The curriculum will be implemented in January for the Spring term and evaluated during the Summer term.

This project will also be pivotal in engaging colleagues from both trusts to work together alongside special school colleagues, thereby strengthening the skills and expertise of mainstream school staff. It will also be important to understand how best to measure the impact of the specialist curriculum pathway using metrics such as progress, behaviour, outcomes, and deep dives with staff.

School Challenge

At Newport Community School Primary Academy School, the minority of pupils with complex needs, presented through behaviour that challenges how an adapted mainstream classroom is not able to meet their needs despite high levels of adaptive high quality provision. Through working with the Local Authority, over a space of two years, 5 pupils were identified as requiring placement at a specialist setting and were awarded placements. Currently, there are three pupils who have been assessed by the Local Authority as requiring a specialist setting placement, however no spaces are available for them.

These pupils have a primary area of need of Communication and Interaction and are typically working 4 years below Age Related Expectations. When these pupils have been placed in mainstream classrooms with heavily adapted high quality teaching, their distress and dysregulation occurred on a daily basis for long periods of time, impacting both their mental health and wellbeing. Concerns were held by staff and senior leaders around the suitability of their placement in the mainstream classroom in terms of appropriateness, access to education for themselves and their peers as well as their safety.

What They Did

Through consultation with outside professionals such as Educational Psychologists, Early Years Complex Needs Team and Communication and Interaction advisory teachers, the SENDCo and senior leadership team at Newport began to craft an intervention that supported the needs of these pupils. Through working with a group of SENDCo's from both the Tarka and Ventrus Trust, the SENDCo was able to shape and define the curriculum of the intervention so that has longevity beyond the attendance of pupils currently in attendance should it be needed.

The group was made up of Senco's from across the two trusts including the two secondary schools. The group met over the course of a term once a month to explore the key challenges and to develop a shared rational and curriculum intent which would then inform the development of a Specialist Curriculum Pathway within the trust schools.

The group then developed a Specialist SEND Curriculum Pathway (SSCP) to ensure every pupil receives a curriculum tailored to their individual needs. The approach is child-centred, offering broad, balanced, and creative learning opportunities that build confidence, skills, and knowledge. The SSCP prepares pupils for future transitions, developing self-worth, responsibility, and aspiration towards employment.

The rational set out the key elements the group felt were important when considering the theory of change and covered the following:

- **Access to a Broad and Balanced Curriculum** – the Specialist SEND curriculum pathway (SSCP) allows pupils with SEND to access a broad and balanced curriculum offer in a supportive environment, ensuring they are included in the wider school community whilst accessing a curriculum that prepares pupils for future success
- **Individual Need** – The curriculum is tailored to each pupil's individual needs, focusing on their strengths and helping them overcome challenges. Pupils receive personalised support in line with targets set out on their EHCP. This ensures every pupil is provided with the right curriculum delivered in the right environment for them to make progress.
- **Developing Expertise** – The SSCP ensures that staff receive the right training to support pupils with physical, cognition and communication and interaction needs. This expertise also supports mainstream teachers, enhancing the school's overall ability to meet the needs of all pupils.
- **Belonging** – Pupils accessing the SSCP will be able to access mainstream lessons and broader curriculum activities where possible, allowing them to build relationships with their peers, develop social skills, fostering a sense of belonging.
- **Whole School Inclusion** – Developing the SSCP encourages an inclusive culture, where all staff are trained to support pupils with SEND. This helps the whole school to value and support every pupil.
- **Early Identification and Support** – The SSCP can support early identification of need, providing timely support, and enabling pupils to access the curriculum, thrive socially, and reach their full potential.
- **Flexibility** – The SSCP is adaptable, allowing pupils to receive more support when needed, or gradually move into mainstream classes or a special school placement as they progress.

To structure learning effectively, the group developed three curriculum pathways—Pre-Formal, Semi-Formal, and Formal—allowing for personalised progression based on individual development. Practical and interactive learning, including educational visits and culturally rich experiences, are integral to the approach. The group also reviewed assessment systems ensure progress is measured, enabling all pupils to experience success and reach aspirational targets.

The group also reviewed various pre-formal curriculum offers, including Pathfields special school and Cherry Garden school curriculum. Assessment was also considered, including using the Engagement model, Tapestry, Cherry Garden Branch Maps, the AET Progression framework as well as other developmental and profiling tools.



More inclusive high-quality teaching



More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting

What They Did (continued)

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Outcomes and Anticipated Impact

Pupils at Newport Community School Primary Academy who have access to the pre formal pathway are making progress with their small step bespoke curriculum. Their daily presentation is one of happiness and content as they are supported to navigate the school day within learning environments which are rich in opportunities to develop their communication skills.

Pupils currently accessing the pre formal pathway at Newport are attending full time, whereas in previous years when the pathway was in its infancy, pupils tended to attend on a part time basis.

Families of pupils accessing the pre formal pathway have spoken positively about the provision their child is receiving. Although they recognise that their child will require a placement at a specialist setting for their long term education, feedback has been positive in terms of meeting their child's needs within a mainstream setting.

Staff who have worked with the specialist provisions at Newport since their infancy, recognise the changes the provisions have undergone to improve outcomes for the children. In particular, the inclusion with appropriate whole school activities along with trust in their autonomy to support the children's needs have been noted and shared with senior leaders.

Professionals who work closely with the school, including the lead for Devon's Communication and Interaction team, Devon's SEND advisor and the Deputy CEO for the Tarka Trust have made noted responses in their reports after time spent in the school as part of Quality Assurance and School development respectively.

External SEND Advisor:

"The [...] provision is successful in meeting the needs of those pupils with greater levels of need, many of whom cannot access a mainstream environment. It is a well organise, purposeful space in which the children are well supported with their learning across all areas of development."

Trust Executive Leadership Member:

"The [...] provision have been established over the course of the last academic year and planning was still in its infancy when the trust last visited SEN provision at the school. There has been a huge amount of work undertaken to set up the curriculum pathways and although this is in its infancy the curriculum work has been carefully crafted and is already having a positive impact."



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Outcomes and Anticipated Impact (continued)

Outside agencies provide advice when required, such as tailored speech and language or Occupational Therapy programmes of support which are incorporated within the weekly timetable for the pupils. Newport Community School Primary Academy continues to have strong relationships with the Local Authority who are supportive through funding of EHCPs to ensure provision for these pupils can be provided in a mainstream primary school as an intervention until a placement becomes available at a specialist provision.

Through the use of small step progression statements taken from Cherry Garden School Branches, children on the pre formal pathway have made positive steps forward with their development in a range of curriculum areas. The small incremental nature of each branch ensures pupils development is recognised and at a pace which matches their level of need.

Through the delivered curriculum, pupils are well prepared for transitions in the life including those which are short term, such as becoming familiar with another area of school and those which are long term, such as a new setting outside of school. The curriculum supports pupils transition to adulthood by supporting life skills through, for example, weekly cooking sessions where pupils have the opportunity to try different foods at an appropriate level and practice their food preparation skills.

Our pupils who follow the pre formal pathway will leave the provision with a well embedded sense of security, communication development and an appropriate level of skills linked to those that they will take forward into adulthood.