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## **To develop a trust wide approach to identifying and supporting children and young people (CYP) with speech and language difficulties**

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Publisher	nasen
Publication date	2026
Download date	2026-03-08 13:13:30
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Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/1166">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/1166</a>



## PD Professional group – developing a specialist curriculum pathway

### Trust Lead Case Study

### School/Background Context

The Trust is an educational trust consisting of 11 schools based in a coastal, rural southwest location. It is made up of 10 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.

## The 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 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.

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## What They Did

The group was made up of SENCOs 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.



Increased attendance of learners with SEND



Increased engagement of learners with SEND

## What They Did (continued)

- **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 one from a local special school and a school curriculum from another special school. Assessment was also considered, including using the Engagement model, Tapestry, Branch Maps, the AET Progression framework as well as other developmental and profiling tools.

## Outcomes and Anticipated Impact

As a result of the project, five schools across the two trusts received additional support from the special school to develop their curriculum and staffing expertise. Staff confidence before and after the project showed improvement, as evidenced by a series of learning walks.

As leaders, the project allowed us to understand the extent of pupils accessing an adapted curriculum across the trust. It also enabled us to set out our intent for the curriculum, maintaining a stance of mainstream by presumption as set out in the Code of Practice, and ensuring that all children have access to a broad and balanced curriculum and subject specialist teaching. Within those schools who have already started to implement the curriculum pathway, we are seeing improved attendance and reduced incidences of behaviour recorded.

The 'homework' element of the project required individual schools to take the design and framework of the curriculum and personalize it according to the needs of the pupils accessing the SSCP. Although a range of schools participated in the project, we asked those further along in the implementation stage to share their planning and journey with the other schools. Many of these schools chose to use the special school Curriculum as a model, incorporating elements of Development Matters or Birth to Five and the AET's Progression Framework as assessment frameworks. Examples of short, medium, and long-term planning were then uploaded to a central resource file for other schools to access and use to support their own planning. The feedback was very positive in terms of reducing workload for SENCOs and avoiding 'reinventing the wheel' when planning for the SSCP provision. SENCOs reported that they have found the collaboration aspect of designing the curriculum helpful.

We found that aligning these frameworks with the mainstream book spines or topics that peers were following in mainstream classes made accessing resources more successful. We hope that in the future that the dual alignment between mainstream curriculum and the SSCP will support pupils' successful transition out of the SSCP, whether it is either into special school provision or the mainstream classroom.



Increased attendance of learners with SEND



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## Outcomes and Anticipated Impact (continued)

Another outcome of the project was that working with the special school allowed several of our SENCOs to visit and observe a special school classroom environment and different method of teaching. Creating a low arousal environment was crucial for several settings with pupils whose primary need was autism and these visits, and the use of the Autism Education Trust's environmental audit helped to develop staff knowledge and support implementation. As a result, when visiting provisions, we saw that structuring the environment using the knowledge gained through the visits has an impact on the way in which the environment had been developed. For example, one setting set up workstations for pupils and developed a tray system for introducing new learning which encouraged pupils to navigate a learning space and using zoning helped to embed routines and focus attention.

In delivering the project, as leaders we were able to identify the importance of establishing entry and exit criteria for the SSCP and providing admission guidance that considers age, cognitive profile of the pupils, and specific assessment criteria such as speech and language profile or provision specified in an EHCP or SEN support plan. As a result, as the merger takes place and there is a new larger trust in place, there will be a very clear process to identifying which pupils will need to access the SSCP and to be able to monitor progress at scale.

Now that the guidance is created, the next challenge will be to ensure it is communicated clearly, upheld rigorously, and reviewed regularly. Maintaining links to mainstream classes and peers must continue to be prioritised and finding points in the school day to retain this link during low arousal and/or less academically demanding times needs to be built into the curriculum model as it develops.

As we know, developing a curriculum is a collaborative process. The next steps will be to ensure that staff are trained appropriately to deliver it and that it is properly explained to families and other stakeholders.

The local authority is currently undertaking a change management process and restructuring staff roles and responsibilities. A future focus should be to link with the local authority to support the development of a funding model that will allow sustainability, as there is a shortage of special school places.