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Creating a safe, inclusive space for vulnerable learners: The Hope Centre at Hope Academy

What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

Project Focus

At Hope Academy, we recognised that some of our most vulnerable learners—those with SEND, social anxiety, sensory needs, or long-term absence—needed something different. The Hope Centre was born out of that vision: a purpose-built, inclusive space designed to offer quiet, structured support, bespoke interventions, and a sense of belonging for students who struggle to thrive in a traditional classroom setting.

Introduction

Having been a SENCO for 18 years and a teacher for 26, and I've worked with learners across the neurodiverse spectrum and those with physical and sensory impairments. I've always believed that every learner has unique strengths, and it's a school's job to adapt the environment and our teaching to help them shine.

With the backing of our Principal and a passionate SEND team, we set out to create a space that would meet the needs of learners who needed something "alternative and different." The result was the Hope Centre—a custom-designed facility within our large secondary academy that now supports learners across the school, not just those with formal SEND designations.

Implementation

The Hope Centre is designed to meet the needs of all learners who require 'in reach' support throughout the day and special exam access arrangements. This is a secondary mainstream inclusive environment including a separate dining area for students who require a quiet space throughout the unstructured/ structured times of the day.

Key features of the provision:

- A quiet learning space where learners can decompress. Students have access to laptops, and curriculum materials are saved by Heads of Department on Microsoft Teams for the Hope Centre Drop-in Lead to access and support learners.
- A separate, calm environment designed to support pupils struggling with attendance. This space enables them to access online work and engage with a therapeutic curriculum to aid reintegration into school.

 Increased attendance of learners with SEND

 Better outcomes for learners with SEND

 Improved mental health and wellbeing of learners with SEND

 Increased engagement of learners with SEND

Implementation (continued)

- On the periphery of the Hope Centre, there is a sensory room, a small room for 1:1 and small group teaching, a computer room, a small teaching classroom, and a separate entrance to the drop-in area and dining facility, which is permanently manned.
- Special Access Arrangements are facilitated within a secure area of the Hope Centre, supporting approximately 60 students per year group. The centre houses all learners on a variety of special access arrangements for internal and external examinations.
- A dual-purpose dining room within the Hope Centre serves as a drop-in space for vulnerable learners, offering a quieter alternative during unstructured times.
- The name 'Hope Centre' was chosen to reflect its inclusive ethos, supporting all learners who require something alternative and different.
- An alternative curriculum is available for learners on bespoke timetables. For example, Year 9 students who find the full curriculum overwhelming can opt out of certain subjects and instead receive pre-teaching of GCSE content through AQA Units.
- High-quality delivery of the sustained literacy programme 'Fresh Start' is used to raise reading ages and improve comprehension skills.
- Degree-qualified Teaching Assistants work an additional two hours per week to deliver small-group revision sessions for learners with high needs.

The Hope Centre has been operational for a year now, and it's already become a vital part of our school's inclusive offer. Here's how we made it work:

Designing the Space: We repurposed a former sixth form area into a quiet, secure zone with sensory circuits, a sensory room, 1:1 teaching rooms, a computer suite, and a drop-in dining area. It's staffed consistently by trained adults who know the students well.

Daily Use: Up to 15 students use the centre each day. Some are reintegrating after long absences, others need short-term decompression from lessons due to anxiety or sensory overload. They access their curriculum work via Microsoft Teams, receive 1:1 support, or take part in arts-based therapy. There is always at least one member of staff supervising who is consistent. The students have their own secure area to store their work and subject leaders save curriculum work on Microsoft Teams for all students to access across school at any time.

Literacy and Curriculum Support: Our literacy specialist works with around 40 students weekly, delivering everything from phonics to stretching students to achieve high grades at GCSE, including supporting students who have English as an additional language. Degree-qualified TAs run small group revision sessions, and we offer alternative curriculum pathways like AQA Units and vocational qualifications. The small 1:1 rooms, support learners taking part in Speech & Language programmes, internal and external assessments, or external support from outside agencies.

Drop-In and Dining: The drop-in area is open throughout the day, offering a quiet space for learners who find the hustle of the main school overwhelming. It's supervised and monitored via radio, with central registration and timetabling managed by the SENCO and Inclusion Manager.

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Implementation (continued)

Staffing and Training: Our SEND team includes a non-teaching SEND Lead, a part-time SENCO, a Hope Centre Manager, a Drop-In Supervisor, and 17 Teaching Assistants. Staff receive regular training in the four broad areas of need, sensory integration, literacy intervention, and mental health. Entrance to the Hope Centre is a single door keypad entrance, there is a small office next to the entrance where the Hope Centre Manager is situated, and she monitors students entering the centre and registers them centrally using a radio to check they have permission if not already timetabled to enter. The Hope Centre Drop-in Supervisor is on radio all day monitoring students in and out of the facility liaising with attendance and senior leaders. They are registered centrally and timetables of students using the facility are drawn up by the SENCO in liaison with Senior Leadership and the Inclusion Manager for learners using the area.

Monitoring and Review: Weekly inclusion meetings with SLT and the Principal ensure that every learner using the Hope Centre is tracked for progress, attendance, and behaviour. We follow the Graduated Approach and liaise closely with parents and external agencies. Students are always re-integrated into lessons, those who are unable to do this will have a bespoke timetable part mainstream and part Hope Centre in a small number of cases.

Key Learning

- **Shared vision is essential.** Senior leaders, from both settings, must commit to a unified approach, with clear agreements and ongoing dialogue.
- **Staff training drives success.** CPD tailored to each setting ensures staff are equipped to support inclusive practice.
- **Dedicated space and time matter.** A consistent, welcoming environment helps pupils feel secure and ready to learn.
- **Integration must be intentional.** Structured opportunities for interaction—academic and social—support meaningful inclusion.
- **Monitoring sustains momentum.** Regular review of impact and revisiting the vision keeps the provision responsive and relevant.

Outcomes and Impact

The impact has been significant—and not just for learners with SEND.

Academic Progress: Continued improved progress and attainment over the last three years for our KS4 learners with SEND. Progress data for KS4 pupils with SEND outperforms their non-SEND peers. GCSE results show a closing gap for FSM and Pupil Premium students, and literacy progress at KS3 is well above national expectations. Reading ages are improving for learners with the highest needs enabling these pupils to access the modified curriculum.

Attendance and Behaviour: Attendance for SEND learners has improved, and we've seen a dramatic reduction in suspensions and permanent exclusions. Only 3 exclusions out of 1,295 students this year.

Alternative Provision: The number of students needing external AP has dropped from 16 in 2021 to just 5 in 2024.



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Outcomes and Impact (continued)

Student Voice: Learners say they feel safe, valued, and supported. They appreciate having a space to go when things get tough and trust the staff who work with them.

Staff Confidence: Staff feel more equipped to support learners with SEND thanks to regular training and collaboration with the SEND team. During a recent visit from School Improvement Partner, it was noted *“staff are aware of the needs of learners and how best to meet their needs in the classroom.”*

Key Learning

Here are the ingredients that make the Hope Centre work—and that we believe are essential for anyone looking to replicate this model:

- Provide a safe, secure space where the most vulnerable learners feel comfortable engaging—ideally a quiet area within the school.
- Train key staff to effectively support vulnerable learners in their engagement (see training recommendations below).
- Ensure staffing is as consistent as possible—this is crucial.
- Employ an experienced literacy practitioner dedicated to supporting students, particularly those with SEND.
- Maintain a well-trained SEND team, with regular training in the four broad areas of need. Identify specialist practitioners to work with bespoke groups both in and out of the classroom.
- Train all teachers and support staff in the Four Broad Areas of Need to ensure a whole-school understanding.
- Provide SEND team members with training in sensory needs, and identify key staff to run sensory programmes.
- Equip the SEND team to deliver high-quality, intensive literacy programmes for the weakest readers, with oversight from SEND Leads.
- Assess the skill set of the team working closely with SEND learners. Degree-qualified staff can deliver bespoke interventions in underperforming GCSE subjects—these can take place after school. Negotiate with the Principal for a small number of additional paid hours (e.g., 14 hours across 3 TAs was approved by the Trust Finance Team to support Year 11 learners in the lead-up to exams).
- Maintain close liaison with parents throughout the process.
- Identify Parent Advocates to speak with new parents during Open Evenings and coffee mornings.
- *Monitor data closely to enable early identification of support needs—whether curriculum-based or requiring multi-agency input. Follow the SEN Code of Practice (2015), ensuring all staff, including pastoral teams, are trained in the Assess, Plan, Do, Review Graduated Approach.*
- Work closely with English leads to ensure high-quality literacy programmes are delivered.
- Ensure the SENCO/SEND Lead attends weekly Heads of Department meetings to advocate for lesson adaptations in new curriculum initiatives, and to share these with subject practitioners in departmental meetings.
- Have the SENCO/SEND Lead attend weekly Inclusion meetings with the Principal and SLT to proactively identify students who require something “alternative and different.”

 **Increased attendance of learners with SEND**

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Key Learning (continued)

- Establish a Nurture (Assisted Learning) group of up to 12 learners in each year group, supported by at least one Teaching Assistant. These students follow a modified curriculum while still accessing all subjects on a full departmental timetable.
- Conduct guided options conversations with SLT and SEND Leads for high-needs learners, involving parents to ensure positive outcomes and successful post-16 placements.
- Offer a broad and inclusive curriculum, including Entry Level Maths, Functional Skills English, AQA Units, BTEC subjects, Engineering, Sports Studies, Hospitality & Catering, Child Development, Health & Social Care, Construction, and Arts Awards (Bronze, Silver, Gold).
- *“Create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils without exception.”* – EEF Guidance Report
- *“Complement high-quality teaching with carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions.”*

Conclusion

The Hope Centre has transformed how we support vulnerable learners at Hope Academy. It’s not just a room—it’s a philosophy. We’ve created a space where students feel safe, supported, and able to succeed. The data backs it up, but more importantly, the students tell us it’s working.

If you’re thinking about setting up something similar, start with your learners. Listen to them. Build your team. And don’t be afraid to do something different.

Appendix I

Staff training and development at the Hope centre

[ASD Enhanced Course | St Helens Services for Schools](#) 

[Fresh Start - Ruth Miskin Literacy](#) 

[The four broad areas of need | nasen](#) 

[Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](#) 

[Specialist Sensory Integration Centre | The Sensory Hive | Whiston](#) 

[Speech and Language - NHS Training St Helens](#) 

[ASD Training - St Helens LA](#) 



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Appendix I (continued)

- Teachers and TAs receive a total of **4–5 hours of SEND-specific training per year**, focused on the most relevant areas where up-to-date knowledge and skills are needed.
- **Twilight INSET** sessions offer a more bespoke training package, allowing staff to:
 - Refresh their skills,
 - Participate in workshops led by SEND Leaders,
 - Engage in Q&A sessions focused on strategies to deliver personalised learning programmes for students.
- In addition to whole-school training, **weekly after-school meetings** are held for Heads of Department and Pastoral teams. SEND Leads attend these separately to provide input and ensure that learners' needs are being met in the most appropriate and effective ways.
- **TAs delivering intensive literacy programmes** receive:
 - 2 hours of training from the Lead Practitioner in English,
 - Additional training from the programme provider to ensure maximum impact.
- TAs also receive **bespoke training packages** delivered by external SEND specialists. These typically run for up to 6 weeks, with 1-hour sessions each week.
- In addition, TAs complete **online courses** in key areas such as:
 - Mental health,
 - Safeguarding,
 - Speech and language.

These online modules amount to at least 2 additional hours per term, on top of the 3 hours per term provided through Twilight sessions.

Appendix II

Staffing and resource requirements at the Hope Centre

- SEND Lead 3 days per week (experienced qualified teacher and SENDCO) None Teaching
- SENCO – 50 % timetable teacher of KS3 English 50% SENDCO
- Hope Centre Manager (HLTA – allocates TAs, coaches TAs, delivers numeracy intervention and baseline testing.
- Hope Centre Drop-in Supervisor
- Specialist Literacy Intervention Teacher, GCSE, EAL,
- 17 TAs including part time employees. (These operate across school)

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Appendix II (continued)

Non-staff resource:

- Investment in Ruth Miskin Fresh Start Literacy Programme.
- Sensory equipment
- Computer room
- Laptop Caddy – small laptops for use in the Drop-in room
- PC in all small rooms
- Large quiet space in remote area of school (previously a 6th Form area)
- Partition and re-design of previous 6th Form area for Hope centre to make it 'Fit for Purpose'
- SENCO/ SEND Lead Office PC each
- Meeting Room, external agencies, parents, Annual Reviews etc, or used in exams.
- Students require 30 mins daily 5 times per week on Fresh Start. 40 students now involved and making very good progress. Intense 1:1 teaching. Progress monitored on a spreadsheet. 4 x TAs and 1 x HLTA delivering programme.
- GL Assessment used to baseline test reading and comprehension ages once per year. Fresh Start internal testing evidencing progress. Internal subject specific assessment demonstrating improvements in progress and attainment of participants.

Timetabling:

- 2hrs 30 mins per week all year 30 mins daily Literacy programme Fresh Start
- Revision bespoke small group 1 hour per week 14 weeks prior to exams, subject dependant.
- EAL sessions 2 hours per week 1:1, 10 students
- English curriculum intervention small groups 3-5 1 hour per week before school, or bespoke curriculum.
- 1:1 – high challenged students 4- 5 hrs per week English intervention bespoke curriculum
- Small groups 40 mins per week intensive GCSE skills taught, Y10 and Y11 total 15 students. Extra-Curricular after school Y11 1 hr per week.
- Lexia 40 students in Y7 and 40 in Y8 3 x 30 mins per week Form time run by TAs. Same learners on rotation brought out of lessons an additional 1 hour per week for Lexia delivered on computers.
- Drop-Ins
- 1hr – 4 hrs per day up to half a term with re integration to lessons. Students rotate.
- Sensory Exercises
- 10 mins per time. 10 students on regular programmes daily
- Up to 20 students as individuals using sensory room and sensory equipment.
- GCSE Revision small group intensive support delivered by degree qualified TAs
- SEND Lead monitoring Mock GCSE results from Summer Y10, intervention put in place for all learners below target, Core priority, then other subjects over time. 1 hour per week after school x 4 TAs delivering English, Maths and Science 14 hours additional pay leading up to GCSEs.