



NASS
2025 AWARDS

2025 Finalists

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Celebrating the difference

I say it every year – and it remains true – one of the real highlights of the NASS calendar is reading through the award entries. They are an inspiring reminder of the extraordinary impact our schools have on children and young people, and of the passion, creativity and commitment that drive that impact every single day.

This year's shortlisted entries shine a light on everything that's special about our member schools and the people who make them exceptional. They may only offer a glimpse of the work happening in classrooms, playgrounds and communities across the country, but each one is a powerful example of innovation, dedication and life-changing impact. They are also a vital part of NASS's narrative as we promote the role of special schools with Government and other stakeholders.

A MOMENT TO REFLECT

In your busy school lives, it's not always easy to pause and take stock of achievements. Yet moments like this matter. If reading these entries makes you think, "We're doing something just as great – or even better!" then we would love you to enter next year.

That's exactly why the NASS Awards exist – to bring our community together to recognise, celebrate and promote the difference we make, not just individually, but collectively. The awards are a reminder that while each school has its own unique character, we are united by a shared mission to help children and young people thrive. Together we show the real value of special schools.



These awards remind us what's possible when passion, expertise and belief in every child come together.

you make

THANK YOU TO ALL ENTRANTS AND OUR JUDGES

We are enormously grateful to everyone who entered this year. You gave our judges the hardest – and most rewarding – task of all! Each entry was considered carefully and assessed impartially.

A special thank you to our judges – Deirdre, Matt, Sharon and Melissa – for generously giving their time and expertise.

WITH THANKS TO OUR SPONSORS

Finally, a huge thank you to our headline sponsor, ASDAN, whose support makes these awards possible. We are also deeply grateful to AssuredPartners, sponsors of the Innovation category, and Edwin, who is our Outstanding Impact category sponsor. Your partnership allows us to celebrate the remarkable work happening in our schools every day – work that transforms lives, raises aspirations and shapes brighter futures.



Inspired to enter next year's NASS Awards?

The 2026 NASS Awards will open for entries on **Friday 1st May 2026**



Equipping every learner for life beyond the classroom

For over 30 years, ASDAN has worked with educators to shape flexible, practical programmes that help learners build the confidence, skills and independence they need to thrive in adult life.

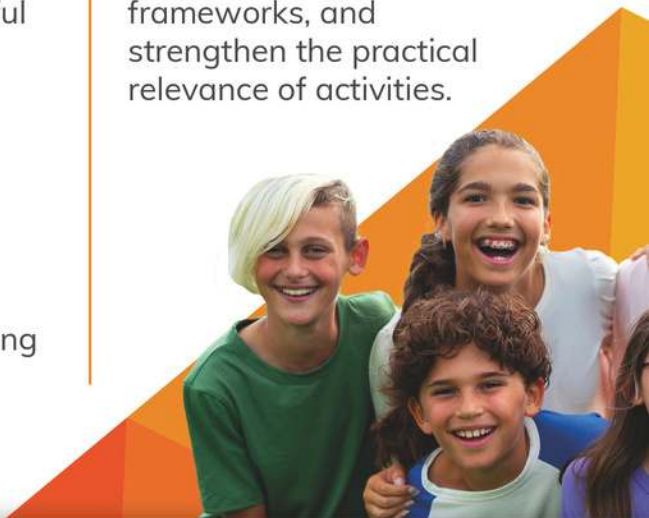
ASDAN's **Preparing for Adulthood** is a suite of four programmes designed to support learners with SEND in a range of settings. These courses focus on meaningful and real-life outcomes.

Learning that grows with the learner

New Horizons and **Transition Challenge** are two programmes at the heart of this offer, supporting young people aged 9–13 and 14–16 respectively.

In response to the evolving needs of learners and feedback from educators, ASDAN is refreshing both programmes.

New Horizons will relaunch in September 2025, followed by Transition Challenge in December 2025 – with updates to enhance accessibility, align with current curriculum frameworks, and strengthen the practical relevance of activities.



ASDAN

Discover how ASDAN can support your learners at asdan.org.uk

“ In refreshing New Horizons and Transition Challenge, we’ve built in more choice and flexibility so activities are truly meaningful for each learner. New templates encourage greater learner contribution and give learners the opportunity to personalise their student books and portfolios, while giving tutors valuable insight. Tutor feedback celebrates small wins, ensuring learners feel recognised for their achievements. These updates keep the programmes person-centred, practical and inspiring. ”

Melanie Baggaley, ASDAN
Senior Education Development Partner



Driven by partnership, powered by purpose

ASDAN believes that education for all learners with SEND must be ambitious, holistic and person-centred.

Our team of experts can help you build a curriculum that equips every learner with the tools to lead a confident, fulfilling adult life.

Or scan the QR code to complete the expression of interest form and speak to an ASDAN expert.





Breaking Barriers & Inclusion

Breaking Barriers judge

Matt Keer, SEND parent & contributor to Special Needs Jungle



The range of entries in this category wasn't just consistently high-quality, it was exceptionally broad too. From individuals making a difference to hundreds of pupils across a local authority, to an entire school population enriching the lives of a single group, it was extraordinarily difficult to choose a winner.

The Children's Trust School

'SEE LIKE ME'- enhancing inclusion for learners with PMLD and sensory impairments

SEE LIKE ME was created in recognition that children with PMLD face visual challenges, even without a formal vision impairment diagnosis. Acknowledging that physical positioning and environmental factors can severely limit visual access, the school has embedded practical strategies to promote meaningful engagement. Staff training, including simulation spectacles, sensory-based learning and the OCN-accredited course *Understanding the Needs of Individuals with PMLD*, have built deep empathy and understanding. Small changes, such as wearing black to improve contrast, have had a big impact. One pupil noted, "Wearing black is good to see".



The school has refined bespoke Functional Vision Assessments with input from Positive Eye and SeeAbility and extended its work into the arts through collaboration with the Royal Ballet and Opera House, helping artists better understand and adapt to visual impairment. Strong evidence from pupil outcomes, staff feedback, and external collaboration shows that SEE LIKE ME is driving long-term, culture-shifting change within the school and wider community.

Wings School Notts

Innovative and inclusive approaches to incorporating physical activity and sport into the daily curriculum

Wings School Notts has developed innovative and inclusive approaches to embedding physical activity and sport into the daily curriculum, making a significant impact on pupils and the wider community. Their bespoke hybrid PE curriculum, shaped using the national curricula of England and Wales, emphasises physical literacy and transferable life skills such as resilience, determination and understanding health and wellbeing. PE, school sport and physical activity are used as distinct but connected tools to support holistic development, focusing on participation at each pupil's own level and pace. Changes like introducing a relaxed sports style uniform have helped remove barriers and increase engagement. As a Youth Sport Trust Lead Inclusion School for Nottinghamshire, Wings supports inclusive practice across the county. Their work has been recognised through the Gold School Games Mark and the Outstanding Inclusive Practice award. The approach is having a clear impact, with the school reporting boosted pupil confidence, increased physical activity and new opportunities for leadership and wellbeing.



Orchard Education

Cross-generational inclusion and visibility in the community through coproduction

This project has broken down barriers between young people with SEND and older adults in local care settings. Through its Personalised Learning Programme, the school developed a meaningful partnership with a residential care home, creating inclusive, reciprocal experiences that support communication, confidence, life skills and wellbeing on both sides. Learners read to residents, share sensory tools, collaborate on arts and crafts and develop new skills through mutual teaching. This inclusive model challenges stereotypes and fosters empathy and respect, with learners requesting further opportunities to volunteer and pursue work experience in health and social care.



The outcomes are wide-reaching: 81% of pupils improved their reading scores; 71% made measurable gains in social communication through the Talkabout programme; and care home residents reported better engagement, hydration and emotional wellbeing. The school's model is now expanding to other local settings and has become a sustainable feature of both Orchard's curriculum and its wider community presence.



Innovation

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AssuredPartners

Innovation judge

**Deirdre Fitzpatrick - Special school consultant,
trainer & inspector**



It was wonderful to see so many of you throw your hat in the ring for the Innovation award. The most applications we have had so far! And given all the changes in the SEND system, rarely has innovation been so important. What an honour it was to be the judge of this year's Innovation award.

Swalcliffe Park School

Development of a Quality of Life (QoL) framework and establishment of the national QoL Network for best practice sharing

Swalcliffe Park School has developed and embedded a pioneering Quality of Life (QoL) framework that places student and family voice at the centre of planning and support. Through weekly keyworking and termly surveys, the school gathers meaningful, real-time data, empowering families and shaping interventions that reflect what matters most to each learner.

This approach is supported by a bespoke IT system that tracks individual and whole-school trends, enabling timely, data-informed decisions across curriculum, strategy and Annual Reviews. Staff are trained as confident data users and a dedicated Independence Curriculum, grounded in QoL theory, helps students develop essential life skills.

Swalcliffe's culture shift has extended nationally through the creation of the QoL Network which currently has 16 member schools across the UK. It enables collaboration and best practice sharing. Recognised internationally, the framework has been presented at conferences and is shaping a new standard for how autistic students and families experience support, learning and long-term wellbeing.



Quorn Hall School

Health of the Nation Outcome Scales Child and Adolescent (HoNOSCA) Mental Health Holistic Framework

Quorn Hall School has transformed its therapeutic provision through an integrated HoNOSCA framework – a pioneering, data-driven approach to monitoring and supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Developed to address fragmented multi-disciplinary practices, the school now holds weekly MDT meetings aligning HoNOSCA scores with EHCPs, academic progress and pastoral data to ensure coordinated, pupil-centred interventions. This three-tiered model (Universal, Targeted, Specialist) identifies both EHCP-aligned and additional needs, driving precise and timely support. Since implementation, the school has seen a 39% whole-school improvement in HoNOSCA scores, with significant reductions in behaviours of concern, stronger peer relationships and improved academic engagement. The framework has empowered staff, improved parent collaboration and informed training and funding strategies. It is now central to Quorn Hall's culture and operations, offering a replicable model in SEMH education that embeds wellbeing at the heart of learning.



Northern Counties School

A new outcome measure tool to measure the impact of therapy on learners' quality of life and access to education

Northern Counties School has developed a groundbreaking tool to measure therapy outcomes for children with complex needs. Adapting the national Therapy Outcome Measures (TOMs), they created the Paediatric Learning Disability and Complex Needs MDT scale, designed for learners with profound disabilities, sensory needs, and communication challenges.



Created in collaboration with NHS teams, special schools, local authorities, and national charities, the tool captures real changes in wellbeing, independence, and learning. Its accessible format supports families, guides therapy and informs commissioners.

Now published in the TOMs manual, it is embedded across the school and gaining national recognition through conference presentations, training programmes, and professional publications.



Outstanding Impact

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Edwin

Outstanding Impact judge

**Sharon Gray OBE - Education Consultant,
Wholehearted Learning**



Judging the Outstanding Impact category was both a profound honour and deeply inspiring. The exceptional submissions highlighted unwavering dedication to supporting vulnerable young people and their families. Each initiative reflected authentic presence, compassion and collaboration, showing how safe, nurturing environments foster resilience and healing. These powerful stories stand as a testament to the extraordinary potential within our sector to create meaningful transformation, heart to heart, life by life.

William Henry Smith School and Sixth Form

The Smith Foundation Careers Programme

The Smith Foundation's innovative, careers programme delivers outstanding, tailored support for students with SEMH needs. Aligned with all eight Gatsby Benchmarks and fully embedded across school, sixth form and residential care, it empowers learners to imagine, experience and achieve meaningful futures. In 2024, every school leaver secured a post-16 placement, a remarkable 100% success rate that reflects the programme's depth, consistency and impact. Students take part in real-world internal roles, external work placements and dynamic employer encounters from palaeontologists to engineers and authors. Creative initiatives like 'Jobs Everywhere' and student-led Careers Days help learners connect education to aspiration. Every opportunity is trauma-informed, sensory-aware and carefully structured to build self-belief, communication and independence. Innovation runs throughout: a bespoke tracking system supports planning; governors lead mock interviews and mentoring; and employer partnerships are adapted to SEMH needs. More than a standalone offer, the programme is fully embedded driven by structure, creativity and belief in each learner's potential.



Acorn Park School

Turning an inadequate curriculum into an outstanding one

In just four years, Acorn Park School has transformed from an Ofsted-rated 'Inadequate' to 'Outstanding' across all parts of the school (Early Years to Sixth Form) through bold, strategic and research-led change. The journey began with a full curriculum overhaul and leadership reset in 2020. A thematic, knowledge-rich curriculum was developed anchored in high expectations, reading and subject coherence. Dual pathways (Formal and Semi-Formal) ensure personalised challenge for learners with complex needs, rooted in National Curriculum standards and EHCP outcomes. High-quality CPD, coaching, and rigorous quality assurance uplifted teaching and empowered staff to co-lead change. From lesson design to resource development, staff became active agents of improvement. Robust assessment systems, peer mentoring and collaborative planning now sustain a shared culture of excellence. As one parent noted, *"Our children are known, understood, and inspired"*. Today, Acorn Park reflects a consistent, ambitious and inclusive approach to special education, one that prioritises long-term impact over short-term results.



West Kirby School and College

The Pastoral Care Team

At the heart of West Kirby School and College is a committed, dynamic Pastoral Care Team (PCT), whose work exemplifies outstanding impact through inclusion, empathy and practical support. This five-member, non-teaching team delivers more than traditional pastoral duties, they lead a whole-school cultural shift where every pupil and staff member is empowered to thrive.



Under the motto *"united we are stronger"*, the team leads in areas including anti-bullying, mental health, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, sleep and wellbeing, and after-school enrichment. Through long-term interventions, pupil ambassador programmes, staff training and community outreach, they create real change for pupils with SEMH needs — supporting friendships, resilience and emotional literacy. The data speaks volumes: 100% of pupils in behaviour interventions showed improvement, most with better attendance. After-school club participation rose from 0 to 30 pupils in three years and parent engagement in training has steadily grown. The PCT's work has been transformative, creating a more inclusive, connected and confident school community.



Special Contribution



Special Contribution judge

**Melissa Farnham - Chief Executive,
ASDAN**

Having spent much of my career in SEND and with NASS, judging the Special Contribution category felt deeply personal. Each nominee is a powerful example of what it means to lead with heart and purpose, quietly pushing boundaries, breaking down barriers, and working tirelessly to bring equity, dignity, and opportunity to every young person in their care.

Sarah Deaville

**Co-founder & CEO,
Hopedale Children and Families
Services**

Sarah Deaville's deep commitment to putting children first is widely recognised across the Hopedale Children and Families Services community. Over 12 years as co-founder and CEO – having previously been a teacher and Headteacher – she has created and sustained schools and care homes where thousands of vulnerable pupils have received the highest quality education and care.



Colleagues describe her as humble yet visionary, leading with both head and heart. Known for knowing every child's name and story, Sarah celebrates their strengths while moving "heaven and earth" to meet their needs. Families trust her completely, often crediting her with giving children the belief and tools to live happy, successful lives.

One former pupil shared - *"I am now 25 with my own house, business and little boy... this has only been possible thanks to Sarah"*. Staff, too, flourish under her leadership, describing a culture of trust, professional growth and genuine care for wellbeing. Her daily mantra *"if the child needs it or wants it, they shall have it"* captures the unwavering, child-centred ethos that has transformed not only schools, but lives.

Kerry Taylor

Principal, Highgate Hill House School

Her colleagues describe Kerry as “*an inspirational leader whose compassion, vision and belief in every child’s potential have transformed the school.*”



Since becoming Principal of Highgate Hill House School three years ago, Kerry has led a remarkable and lasting turnaround. When she arrived, the school faced poor behaviour, low engagement and a fractured staff team. Staff and parents highlight her role in improving behaviour, restoring trust and raising expectations. One parent says, “*the children feel truly loved by the staff*”, reflecting the nurturing culture she has helped shape. Under her leadership, academic outcomes have risen, behaviour incidents have fallen dramatically and the curriculum now blends academic rigour with a whole-child approach. With a focus on inclusive practice, staff development and curriculum reform, Kerry’s leadership is widely recognised as the driving force behind a safer, happier and more ambitious school environment where learners and staff feel valued, empowered and are thriving.

Abigail Darko

Occupational Therapist, Tram House School

Since joining 18 months ago, Occupational Therapist Abigail Darko has transformed therapeutic practice at Tram House School. She quickly identified ways to strengthen provision and address unmet needs, working collaboratively to design innovative, practical solutions. Her colleagues describe Abi as “*one of the most forward-thinking therapists*” they’ve worked with.



She reimagined a staff-run café into a fully embedded Sixth Form learning space, integrating therapy targets to build pupils’ independence, communication and real-world skills. She also co-created a Feminine Care Group, giving young women the knowledge, language and confidence to manage body changes in a safe, inclusive environment. Abi’s creativity shines in personalised interventions, such as sensory-based ‘Oils with Abi’ sessions, which support regulation and fine motor skills while motivating learners. Her impact is clear in outcomes: since she joined, the proportion of pupils meeting or exceeding their targets has risen from under 60% to over 87%. Staff say she not only enhances pupil progress but builds the skills and confidence of those around her, strengthening practice across the school.



Empowering SEND education

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learners thrive

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- Strategic HR & leadership services
- Inclusive curriculum & tuition programmes





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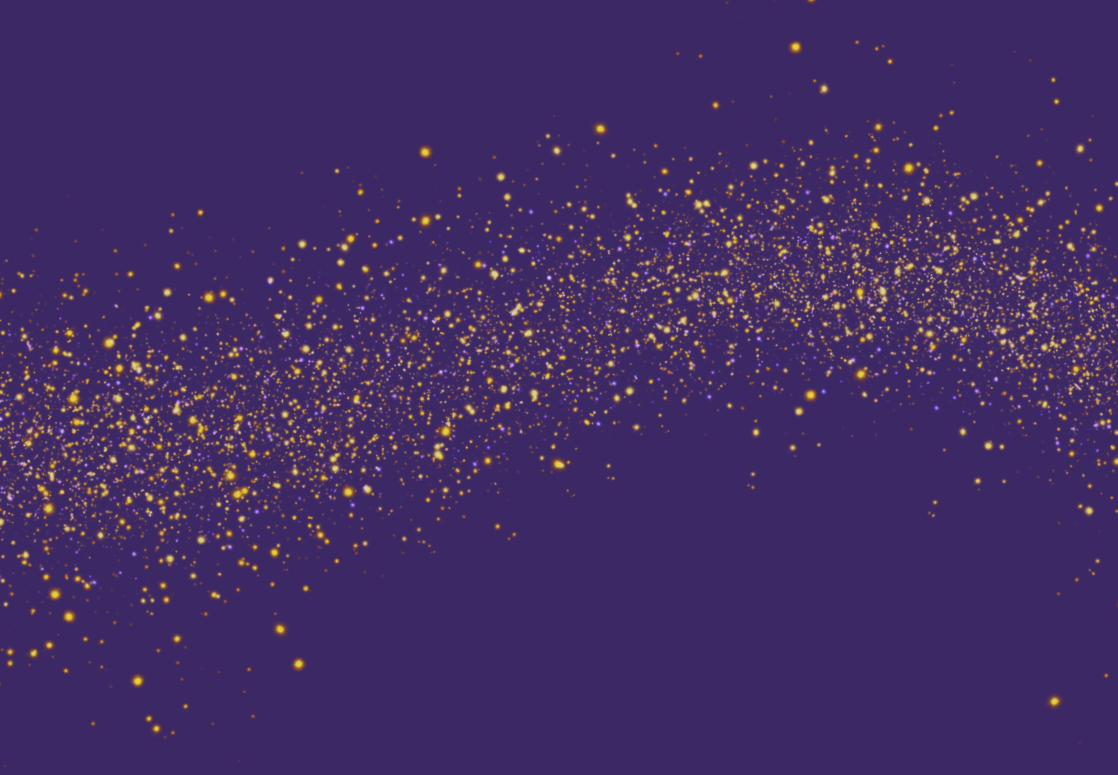
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Congratulations to all our finalists!

With thanks to our judges

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SEND parent and contributor to Special Needs Jungle

Deirdre Fitzpatrick

Special school consultant, trainer and inspector

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CEO, ASDAN