



National Association
of Special Schools

2026/7

NASS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PARTNER TRAINING

Closing date for applications: 5pm, 16th March 2026

National Association of Special Schools (NASS) is delighted to be taking over the management of the highly regarded School Improvement Partner (SIP) training programme, previously run by Mulberry Bush. Endorsed with a Crossfields Institute Quality Mark, the programme equips experienced leaders in special schools and alternative provision with the skills and knowledge to become effective SIPs.

This will be of benefit to leaders' own schools, as well as helping them to provide support and share good practice with other schools. Our regular network events provide a regular forum for updating your skills, and provide a good level of peer support once you have completed the initial SIP training. Throughout our training, there is a continual focus on current educational research.

A SIP helps leaders maintain high quality school provision. They do this by providing professional challenge and support to schools, helping its leadership evaluate its performance, identify priorities for improvement, and plan effective change. This includes:

- acting as a critical professional friend to the school, helping leadership teams with their self-evaluation process, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change
- contributing to whole school improvement, including all education, health and care outcomes
- sharing practice ideas and increasing networking opportunities
- helping leaders stay in touch with current requirements
- providing information to governing bodies on their school's performance
- supporting governors to performance manage their headteacher

Aim of the training

The training aims to enable experienced, successful school leaders and people already holding school improvement responsibilities to develop the skills and knowledge to become a special school and/or alternative provider (AP) SIP.

On successful completion participants will be invited to join the NASS Network of SIPs, which will include three network meetings per year, including ongoing professional development.



Training model

We will deliver the training over a **nine month period, from September 2026 to May 2027.**

There will be **four face-to-face days** and **one two-day residential**. Participants will also have **two placement days**, where they will develop their SIP skills in another participants' school.

A SIP's performance will be evaluated against the core competencies. After each placement day, a course leader will discuss the effectiveness of the visit with the SIP.

Assessments will be completed using the core competencies. High attendance is expected in all aspect of the course. A certificate will be awarded to successful candidates.

Criteria

Applicants will be required to complete an application form and supply the name of a referee.

Required criteria will include:

Either

- Holding responsibility as a headteacher/principal/head of education in a special school or AP for 3 years or more.
- Leading a school through a inspection.

Or

- Working currently in a school improvement role

A supportive reference from their chair of governors/CEO/current SIP or similar is also required.

NASS SIP network

Participants who complete the training and meet the core competencies will be invited to join our SIP network.

We will run three network meetings each year. These will provide members with training updates, and an opportunity to share ideas and resources, and problem solve.

Course venue

The course will be run at the Charney Manor, a stunning Oxfordshire manor house. On-site bed and breakfast accommodation is available for each night prior to the course day. This is not included in the cost of the course. However accommodation for day seven of the course is included in the cost.



Charney Manor, Oxfordshire

Costs

NASS members
£3,000 (plus VAT)

Non NASS members
£3,500 (plus VAT)

How to apply

The course will be limited to 18 delegates.

For more information and an application form please contact admin@nassschools.org.uk

Deadline for applications is 5pm, 16th March 2026

Learning outcomes

- ✓ Understand **the range of functions of the SIP role**
- ✓ Understand how to **structure a SIP visit**
- ✓ Understand how to **report on a visit**
- ✓ See the value of **collecting evidence from different sources**
- ✓ Follow up on **agreed actions from previous visits**
- ✓ Work with staff holding **different roles and responsibilities**, and with governors/trustees
- ✓ Explore common **SIP challenges and barriers**
- ✓ Understand and manage **emotional aspects of the role**
- ✓ Develop a style of work that **empowers leaders to take ownership and delegate responsibilities**
- ✓ Develop a **coaching style of work**
- ✓ Understand an **effective performance management process**
- ✓ Have an awareness of **current key educational issues**
- ✓ Look at the benefits of **being part of a supportive SIP network**



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*The time spent with **positive, like-minded individuals** has been fantastic and **gives you a professional lift**. The training days make you really think and reflect within a supportive environment and analyse what you're doing within your own school, as well as preparing you for the role of SIP. I can honestly say, it is possibly **some of the best training I have received as a Headteacher** over the last 16 years. I always look forward to the next training day and we have formed a group that will keep in touch after the 'training' has finished.*

Core competencies

Course assessment will be based on the following abilities:

APPROACH

To work collaboratively with members of the school team

To develop trusting relationships with colleagues

To recognise that you may not be seeing the whole picture, so to maintain an open enquiring mind

To use a coaching approach

To pay attention to underlying reasons beneath adult and pupil behaviour

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

To recognise there are different ways to get good outcomes

To be able to use different leadership styles, and to use these appropriately

To be a good listener

To plan and use time effectively

To produce accurate and timely written notes of visit

To self-reflect and evaluate your own work

SCHOOL COORDINATION

To be led by the directions of the school to ensure that they get what they have asked from you

To be mindful of the particular challenges facing the school, taking care to help them become more resilient over time

To support the contribution of others to your visits, taking care not to be too dominant

To stick to the commitments you have made around all aspects of the visit

KNOWLEDGE

To have secure knowledge of key current educational thinking, including inspection framework



*The training is **pertinent, relevant and very enabling**.
Through a combination of delivery by trainers, working with
peers and exploring research it effectively develops key skills
and knowledge required for the role of SIP*

**Deirdre
Fitzpatrick**



Deirdre has been a school improvement partner for over ten years and is currently a SIP for over 40 schools. She works with a vast range of schools including all through generic special schools, hospital schools, SEMH, PRUs and APs, residential and mainstream schools as well as schools in the maintained and independent sector. Deirdre also works to monitor schools for a number of organisations including Challenge Partners and Local Authorities. She has been a DfE expert advisor and has supported both free schools and schools in challenging circumstances. She has been a Director of Education, a National Leader in Education, Headteacher and overseer of three Outstanding Special Schools (one of which won TES School of the Year).

Andy Lole



Andy started his career as a mainstream primary school teacher. He has many years of leadership experience in special schools. As a headteacher, his school was judged outstanding by Ofsted. He had led many school to school improvement projects. He was a National Leader in Education, and a lead inspector for Ofsted. He has worked as a SIP since 2007, after being accredited by the National College of School Leadership. He has carried out monitoring and support work on behalf of several local authorities.

Dominic Salles



Dominic was an English teacher for 28 years in five mainstream secondary schools, spending nine years as a senior leader leading on teaching, learning and curriculum in three of those schools. His first four years were spent as a graduate tax inspector. He became obsessed with finding out how educational research can be scaled across a school, writing his first book, "The Slightly Awesome Teacher: where edu-research meets common sense" in 2016, and has since written three more books on education. As a consultant, he helps leaders apply research to improve student progress in a range of schools. He has written over a dozen guides for GCSE students and runs the UK's second largest YouTube channel devoted to English GCSE, with over 105,000 subscribers. 27% of his viewers report improving by at least three grades from their mocks.

DAY ONE FRIDAY 18TH SEPTEMBER 2026, 9.30AM TO 3.30PM**What makes an effective SIP?**

Practicalities, protocols, and process

Goals of the day

- For you to have clarity on what makes an effective SIP
- For you to be clear on where your current strengths and areas for development lie
- For you to know how the areas of development can be addressed in the programme
- For you to be clear about some of the practicalities and protocols that will support you in being an effective SIP

Structure of the day

- What makes an effective SIP, key competencies & knowing yourself
- The visit practicalities, protocols and process

DAY TWO TUESDAY 13TH OCTOBER 2026, 9.30AM TO 3.30PM**Diving in deeply!**

Triangulation of evidence

Goals of the day

- For you to have clarity about the most effective documentation to scrutinise and discuss, in order to support the school in making judgements about themselves and what to do next
- For you to understand the best types of questions about documentation which will illicit informative answers
- For you to understand how to conduct an effective curriculum review
- For you to understand how to interrogate someone else's data

Structure of the day

- Review of the different evidence available and how best to analyse it
- How to conduct a curriculum review



*Meeting regularly with other Head teachers on this course, with **the most knowledgeable of tutors**, has not only taught me a great deal but become **a highlight in the calendar**. Everything needed to become a SIP has been **thought about, documented and delivered with skill**.*

DAY THREE TUESDAY 17TH NOVEMBER 2026, 9.30AM TO 3.30PM**Coaching, supervision and managing feelings****Goals of the day**

- To understand and recognise that a school may be anxious about your visit (especially the first one) and understand how to alleviate fears so you get the best from the staff and pupils.
- To understand how to be an effective coach and be able to practise effective coaching techniques throughout the course and beyond.
- To be able to identify when staff may need supervision and be able to signpost them to this.
- To understand the range of strategies that could be used to manage difficult conversations when they arise.

Structure of the day

- Managing difficult conversations, supervision and being an effective coach.
- Preparation for the first school visit.

DAY FOUR DECEMBER 2026 / JANUARY 2027**First placement day**

Practice SIP visit to school followed by one-to-one coaching from course leaders.

DAY FIVE TUESDAY 9TH FEBRUARY 2027, 9.30AM TO 3.30PM**Lessons learnt, report writing and safeguarding****Goals of the day**

- Through discussion with the group, for you to explore learning from the visit – what went well? What you would change and what is the impact on preparation for the next visit?
- For you to explore and understand what is valued about report writing and be able to write an impactful report.
- For you to understand how to support the school in checking and helping to ensure effective safeguarding.

Structure of the day

- Feedback from first SIP visit, QA, common problems and issues. Effective report writing.
- Supporting effective safeguarding.

DAY SIX MARCH 2027 / APRIL 2027**Second placement day**

Practice SIP visit to school followed by one-to-one coaching from course leaders.

**DAY SEVEN WEDNESDAY 5TH MAY 2027, 9.30AM TO 6PM
(RESIDENTIAL)**

**Lessons learnt,
what to do
with governors
and trustees
and
Headteachers
Performance
Management**

Goals of the day

- Through discussion with the group, for you to explore how the last school visit went. What did you do differently from the first school visit? How successful were you? How did you know? What practise would you keep and what would you change?
- To understand how to effectively work with governors/trustees and the different types of activities that could be undertaken.
- For you to understand how to effectively conduct a Headteachers Performance Management.

Structure of the day

- Feedback from last practise SIP visit.
- Working with Governors. What's the agenda? Headteachers PM

Evening Celebration!

DAY EIGHT THURSDAY 6TH MAY 2027, 9AM TO 4PM

**Current key
educational
issues. What
the research
says!**

Wrap up and
next steps

Goals of the day

- For you to have an effective understanding of some of the key educational issues that may impact on your role.
- For you to be able to reflect on the course – what you have learnt and what you need to do to perfect your role going forward.

Structure of the day

- An exploration of the current key educational issues.
- Reviewing course, wrap up and next steps.



*The course has provided rare opportunities for us heads **to network and share good practice and expertise**. It has given me time to both **reflect on my own competencies and practice and reinvigorated the learner in me**. The course leaders come highly recommended as facilitators, balancing the content with the right amount of humour!*