NASS 2026 AWARDS

2026 Finalists

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Celebrating our special

One of the privileges of leading NASS over the past 21 years has been seeing first-hand the dedication, expertise and care that exists across our special school community. Over the years, the NASS Awards have provided a wonderful window into the work taking place in our schools and the people who make them so special. They give us an opportunity to celebrate that work and recognise those making a difference to children and young people every day.

This year's entries showcase the creativity, commitment and innovation that define our sector. While only a small number can be shortlisted, every submission helps tell the collective story of special schools, helping NASS champion and promote their work nationally. Together, they demonstrate the impact special schools have on learners, families and communities.

MORE THAN AN AWARDS PROGRAMME

Amid the demands of school life, it's easy to move quickly from one challenge to the next without taking time to reflect on achievements. The NASS Awards offer a chance to do just that, recognising success, sharing good practice and celebrating the contribution of colleagues across our community.

I hope you enjoy reading about this year's finalists and, if you're inspired by their stories, consider sharing your own next year.

> *While only a small number can be shortlisted, every submission helps tell the collective story of special schools, helping NASS champion and promote the sector nationally.*

school community



THANK YOU TO OUR BRILLIANT JUDGES

Thank you to everyone who entered this year's awards. The quality of the entries and the inspiring stories behind them certainly didn't make life easy for our judges!

A special thank you to our judges this year - Elly, Christine, Margaret and Rachel. We are grateful to them for generously giving their time to ensure every entry received the consideration it deserved.

WITH THANKS TO THIS YEAR'S GENEROUS SPONSORS

Finally, a huge thank you to our headline sponsor, Assured Partners, whose generous support makes these awards possible. We're also grateful to our category sponsors, Edwin, Christie & Co and Nine Points Property. Thank you for helping us recognise and celebrate the fantastic work taking place across the NASS community.

Claire Dorer

Inspired to enter next year's NASS Awards?

The 2027 NASS Awards will open for entries on **Tuesday 4th May 2027**



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Breaking Barriers To Inclusion

Sponsored by Edwin

Judging the Breaking Barriers To Inclusion category was a privilege. Across every entry, the same thing shone through: what becomes possible when adults hold the highest expectations, build trust and belonging, and truly walk alongside their young people rather than placing a ceiling on them.

In a hard climate for our sector, these stories are proof that putting the human first still works.

Elly Chapple
TEDx Speaker and Author of Diagnosis: Human

Dawn House School

(a Speech & Language UK School)



The Chimes provision

Dawn House School's Chimes provision is a trauma-informed, relationship-first approach designed to break down barriers to inclusion for pupils with complex speech and language challenges, many of whom have experienced trauma or prolonged exclusion from education. Created for pupils who found even specialist settings inaccessible, Chimes provides a safe, personalised environment where trust and regulation can develop at an individual pace. Each pupil has an individualised curriculum, dedicated staffing and a carefully planned pathway towards reintegration into wider school life, supported by integrated therapy and close family engagement. Its multidisciplinary approach brings education, therapy, psychology and wider services together around each pupil's needs. The impact has been significant, with pupils increasing attendance, engaging more consistently with learning and developing confidence and independence. Some progress into larger classes, while others move on to further education, training or employment. Chimes demonstrates how prioritising relationships, regulation and trust can remove profound barriers to education and create sustainable pathways towards inclusion.

Muntham House School

Therapy Hubs



Muntham House School's Therapy Hubs programme removes barriers to timely therapeutic support for pupils in local mainstream schools, helping them remain engaged in education and included within their communities. Developed with local schools, CAMHS and the wider SEND community, the programme provides specialist therapy at no cost to schools or families, overcoming barriers including long waiting times, funding constraints and transport. Since 2021, Therapy Hubs has supported 202 pupils across 13 primary and four secondary schools, providing tailored interventions delivered by qualified therapeutic staff. Close partnership working with schools, families and professionals ensures support is responsive to individual needs and extends beyond therapy sessions into the wider school environment. Participating schools report improvements in attendance, engagement, emotional wellbeing and academic progress, alongside greater staff confidence in supporting pupils with mental health needs. By sharing its model nationally, Muntham House is also helping other special schools develop their own Therapy Hubs, extending its impact beyond the local community. Therapy Hubs was presented at a workshop at the NASS conference in 2024 and went on to help support other schools. In January 2026, Munthan was invited to speak to MPs at the House of Commons about the Therapy Hubs project.

Impact North West Schools

Building partnerships



Impact North West Schools' Prep provision supports students whose education has been significantly disrupted, many having gone months or years without attending school. Working closely with neighbouring local authorities and specialist partners, the school has developed a network of support designed to remove the barriers that can make returning to education feel impossible. Students benefit from daily movement through the RISE Up programme, while The Engine Room, a specialist Occupational Therapy and sensory suite, helps students regulate and creates the conditions for learning. The Engine Room has also been opened to the wider SEND community, helping local children access specialist support while addressing waiting times. Speech and Language Therapists work alongside staff to embed communication strategies in the classroom, while an AV1 robot enables remote reintegration where needed. These partnerships have helped some of the most vulnerable students take their first steps back into education, while extending specialist expertise beyond the school and strengthening a more local, connected and inclusive SEND community.

Innovation

Sponsored by NinePoints Property

I was greatly encouraged by the quality of thinking in this year's innovation entries. Schools are increasingly starting with each young person's needs and context, identifying gaps in provision and developing thoughtful, practical responses—from language and social-emotional interventions to personal and cultural education. These entries demonstrate innovation with purpose, preparing young people for life and offering powerful leadership lessons for the wider system.

Margaret Mulholland
SEND Policy Specialist, Association of School & College Leaders

Meath School

(a Speech & Language UK School)

Pre-phonics Boost



Meath's innovative Pre-phonics Boost programme addresses a critical barrier to learning for pupils with significant and lifelong speech and language challenges who are unable to access traditional phonics teaching. Developed using the NIPA programme developed by Professor Helen Stringer, it was created directly in response to this challenge, grounded in specialist classroom practice at Meath and informed by a deep understanding of the communication profiles of children with SLCN. Pre-phonics Boost focuses on the foundational skills required for phonics, including environmental sound awareness, rhyme, rhythm, syllable awareness, vocabulary and language development. Its digital format translates specialist knowledge into a programme accessible nationally by both special and mainstream schools, and has been trialled in mainstream settings. The programme has improved attention, listening and participation while increasing staff confidence in supporting pupils with communication needs. It aligns with the national agenda to create a more inclusive education system, responding to the growing expectation that expertise from special schools should be mobilised to support mainstream settings.

Treloar School

SEN Teaching and Learning Framework



Treloar School's innovative Teaching and Learning Framework (TTLF) brings teaching, CPD and appraisal together into a single, evidence-informed model designed specifically for a complex SEND environment. Co-developed with teachers over a full year, it translates national standards into practical, SEND-specific principles across six 'Qualities', creating a shared language for high-quality practice and supporting staff ownership of their development. The framework brings together multiple sources of evidence, including learning visits, progress meetings, student voice, peer review and MDT input, to identify strengths and inform CPD and appraisal. Its low-stakes, continuous improvement approach supports professional dialogue and shared practice, while the TTLF Guide provides research, resources and internal expertise to support development. In just 10 months, 80% of teachers rated the framework as helpful or better, with staff reporting greater consistency and clarity in teaching. 100% of teachers reported a positive impact on students, including improved engagement, independence, confidence, communication and access to learning. Shared with SEND specialists and consultants, the framework has strong potential for wider application across the SEND sector.

Moor House School & College

The SHAPE CODING® system



Moor House School's SHAPE CODING® system is an innovative visual approach that shows children with language disorders how sentences are built, using shapes, colours, lines and arrows to develop their understanding and use of oral and written language. First developed at Moor House in 1999, the system has undergone continual research and development, with adaptations informed by research and feedback from clinicians and teachers. The approach addresses the challenge that children with language disorders can find it difficult to learn about language using more language, instead drawing on their relative visual strengths. The system shows the rules of English from simple to complex sentences, while resources include courses, freely downloadable materials, an app and tools for identifying and monitoring grammatical targets. Its reach is significant, with more than 6,000 professionals from 39 countries attending courses and the system adapted for 12 other languages. Seventeen published research studies show that it can lead to progress in understanding and/or use of language in children aged 5–16 with severe language disorders, with a large-scale randomised control trial currently underway.

Outstanding Impact

Sponsored by CHRISTIE & CO

It's always a real pleasure judging outstanding impact.

All the applications had a theme in common, they were passionate about the needs of their particular group of children and young people. They deliver a positive, personalised approach which is prepared to think differently and follows through to real impact, children and parents' testimonies echo that warmth and passion.

Dame Christine Lenehan, DBE
Government's Strategic Advisor on SEND

St Piers School

No More Waiting - Always Active



St Piers's Always Active programme has reimagined its physical education for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties and severe learning difficulties, ensuring every learner can access ambitious, meaningful and enjoyable PE. Recognising that traditional approaches often failed to meet the needs of pupils with complex physical, sensory and communication needs, the school worked with the Surrey Schools Disability Association and specialist consultants to redesign its curriculum, transform its sports hall into an immersive sensory environment and introduce specialist equipment. Its innovative multidisciplinary approach brings together teachers, physiotherapists and speech and language therapists to embed therapeutic goals naturally within PE lessons, while PE Passports track each pupil's progress and ensure provision continually evolves. The impact has been significant, with increased participation, confidence and independence, alongside measurable improvements in physical development, communication and emotional regulation. By sharing its expertise through workshops, collaborative events and inclusive sporting opportunities, St Piers is also helping to strengthen PE provision and improve outcomes for learners with complex SEND across the wider sector.

TreeHouse School

TreeHouse School's approach to relationships, sex and health education



TreeHouse School has developed an exceptional, research-informed approach to relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) that meets the complex developmental needs of autistic pupils with additional learning disabilities. Fully embedded across the school, the programme supports pupils, parents and staff through a consistent, specialist model that promotes safety, dignity and wellbeing. By explicitly teaching boundaries, consent and self-regulation, pupils gain the knowledge, language and confidence to navigate sensitive situations safely. The approach is sustainable, underpinned by whole-school training, specialist staff support and robust record keeping.

Beyond the school, TreeHouse has shared its model across the Ambitious about Autism group, through the Challenge Partners Growing the Top programme and at national conferences, enabling other settings to strengthen their own RSHE provision. Its specialist consultant describes the approach as one of the most thorough and responsive models encountered, reflecting impact that extends well beyond the school community.

Woodend Farm School

Juniper Approach



Woodend Farm School's innovative Juniper Approach has transformed educational experiences for pupils with pathological demand avoidance by placing autonomy, flexibility and emotional safety at the heart of learning.

Recognising that traditional approaches created barriers, the school reimagined teaching, learning and assessment to create a highly personalised model that enables pupils to engage without anxiety-driven demands. Creative, practical and play-based experiences allow children to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that reflect their strengths, while staff continually adapt their practice to meet individual needs. The impact has been profound: pupils who were previously disengaged now participate with confidence, build positive relationships and flourish academically, socially and emotionally. Attendance and engagement have improved, while a 77% reduction in physical interventions reflects increased emotional regulation and a greater sense of safety. By adapting education to fit the needs of its learners, rather than expecting learners to fit the system, Woodend Farm School has enabled some of its most vulnerable pupils to experience success, confidence and a genuine sense of belonging.

Special Contribution

Sponsored by AssuredPartners A Gallagher Company

It has been a real privilege to judge the Special Contribution Award for the 2026 NASS Awards. Honouring individuals who give so much to support children and young people with complex needs is both a highlight and a poignant reminder of what dedication truly looks like. It was a pleasure to read the nominations and hear about the fantastic work and individuals in this sector.

Rachel Barker
Head of Special Educational Needs Schools & Colleges
AssuredPartners

New Barn School

Paul Lowe
School Chef



Paul is far more than the School Chef at New Barn School. Over 6 years, he has become a trusted and much-loved member of the school community, transforming the culture around food while providing warmth, humour and reassurance to pupils and staff alike. Almost every pupil now chooses a school lunch, reflecting the relationships Paul has built and his thoughtful approach to individual dietary needs and food aversions.

Colleagues describe him as “the heart of our school” and a “wonderful example” to pupils, particularly those who benefit from his calm, paternal presence. His impact can be life-changing: one parent credits Paul with helping her son feel able to return to school, try food again and even find the confidence to join a football team. From supporting Occupational Therapists through Fun with Food sessions to creating work experience opportunities and organising community events, Paul consistently goes beyond his role. As one colleague says, “He is so much more than our chef” – a trusted adult, role model and friend whose kindness makes a lasting difference.

Orchard Education

Natalie Potter
PSHE Lead



Natalie has transformed PSHE at Orchard Education, creating opportunities that equip learners with practical skills for adulthood while fostering a strong sense of community and giving. Her innovative Enterprise Days bring together curriculum learning, creativity and real-world experience, enabling learners to develop confidence in budgeting, communication, teamwork, food hygiene, risk assessment and enterprise. What began as a small fundraising event has raised around £10,000 for local charities and become an integral part of the school's curriculum and qualification offer. Natalie's commitment to giving back also drives Mission Christmas, where learners have raised funds and helped provide around 1,000 gifts to disadvantaged children over the past 4 years. Colleagues praise her ability to recognise learners' strengths and create meaningful opportunities for them to succeed, helping to build confidence, self-worth and pride. Orchard's Principal shared that Natalie has helped change perceptions of what Orchard's learners can achieve, demonstrating that they have "an enormous amount to offer". Her influence also extends to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, with her Diversity Door Challenge adopted across the Melrose family of schools.

Howard House School

Charlotte De Oliveira
Headteacher



With nearly 30 years' experience in education and over 15 years in senior leadership, Charlotte brings experience, compassion and a strong belief in every pupil's potential to her role as Headteacher of Howard House School. She has led significant improvements in attendance, engagement, EHCP outcomes and school culture, supporting pupils with complex SEMH needs, including autism and ADHD. Under her leadership, pupils who have experienced school refusal, exclusion and disrupted education are re-engaging with learning. Attendance for individual pupils has increased from 0% to 93.7%, 30% to 95.8% and 47% to 93.3%. In summer 2025, 164 of 240 EHCP targets were either achieved or on track.

Charlotte's contribution extends beyond these outcomes. She has strengthened relationships with families and created a culture where staff feel valued and supported. She does not allow pupils to be defined by previous challenges, instead focusing on their strengths, potential and possibility. As one parent shared, their child is now "a lot calmer and settled at home", with many more positive days at school.

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Congratulations to all our finalists!

With thanks to our judges

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TEDx Speaker and Author of Diagnosis: Human

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