



**Inclusion
in Practice**

Case Study:

**Burton End
Primary
Academy**



How Burton End Primary Academy expanded specialist practice on visuals to support whole school inclusion

A key principle of SEND practice this case study exemplifies:

Specialist settings have valuable expertise and strategies that we can learn from to make mainstream classrooms more inclusive.

At a glance

- Leaders at Burton End Primary Academy have selected strategies from their specialist support hub, and adapted these for use in their mainstream classrooms.
- In particular, they have expanded the use of visual aids or prompts for pupils, from a specialist strategy only used to support pupils in the specialist hub, to a whole-school approach to supporting pupils' early communication and interaction needs.
- Staff have implemented visuals across their classroom practice in reception and year 1.
- In one year since implementing this approach, the proportion of reception pupils within the expected or borderline range for language development rose from 43% to 60%, while severe difficulties halved from 23% to 11%.





Background information

Burton End Primary Academy is a two-form entry mainstream school with pupils aged 3 to 11, and part of the Unity Schools Partnership trust. The Academy includes an on-site nursery and a 12-place specialist support unit known as 'the hub', which caters to Early Years and Key Stage 1 pupils with SEND.



What challenges were you trying to address?

Leaders aimed to support pupils with limited speech, language, and communication skills by helping them express their needs, wants, and preferences more effectively.

Leaders recognised the need to respond to the rising number of pupils with communication and interaction difficulties, many of whom are on the SEND register. The proportion of pupils with SEND, with communication and interaction as their primary area of need has increased significantly year on year: 22% in the 2022–23 cohort (currently Year 2), 56% in 2023–24 (currently Year 1), and 75% in 2024–25 (currently Reception).

This sharp increase highlighted to leaders the growing demand for tailored support and inclusive strategies to meet these pupils' needs from the earliest stages of schooling.





What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

How the project started:

Baseline and standardised Language Link assessments revealed that many pupils were performing below age-related expectations in speech and language. In reception, baseline data from Autumn 2023 showed 43% of pupils were within the borderline or expected range for language development.

Leaders' learning walks and classroom observations found that these communication difficulties were creating significant barriers for learning – for example, pupils' ability to follow instructions and, retain information. They found this was particularly true for younger pupils and those with additional needs.

Observations also found that:

- Teachers and teaching assistants frequently gave long, multi-step verbal instructions, often moving on before pupils had time to process what was said.
- For many learners, this created sensory overload and confusion.
- Sometimes pupils' difficulties in responding were sometimes misinterpreted as poor listening or non-compliance.

The SENCO, who also led the school's specialist early years and key stage 1 hub, recognised a clear opportunity to learn from specialist practice.

What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

The approach:

Leaders focused on a whole-school approach. As needs became more common, leaders intended to shift from individual interventions to whole-class provision that benefits all learners. They wanted strategies to be available to all pupils, rather than anything 'separate from' classroom teaching. They intended to eliminate stigma, and normalise strategies across classrooms. This would ensure all pupils could access them, regardless of ability or diagnosis.

Leaders intended to learn from their specialist hub. Although the hub was designated for 12 pupils, they identified that the similar needs were present in classrooms across the mainstream school.

As part of their approach, leaders aimed to implement a small number of high-leverage strategies to improve outcomes for pupils with

SEND. Drawing on research from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), the Education and Training Foundation, and Speech and Language UK, they prioritised the introduction of visual supports across the school.

Visual tools were chosen due to the strong evidence base supporting their effectiveness. Research indicates that visuals help make abstract concepts more concrete, reduce anxiety, and foster greater independence among pupils (EEF, 2020). For pupils with SEND in particular, visual supports can enhance understanding by reducing reliance on verbal communication alone. The EEF also emphasises the value of visual prompts as scaffolding tools, helping pupils complete tasks successfully by providing accessible and consistent cues.



What does it look like in practice?

1. Resourcing

To initiate this work, the school secured High Needs Funding (HNF) from the local authority. While many of the school's youngest pupils receive early years HNF at their pre-school or nursery, this funding does not automatically continue when they transition to school.

HNF is awarded based on the individual needs of pupils, with applications required each term, supported by a detailed provision map and evidence of need. The school takes a proactive approach to securing this funding for the pupils who need it most, ensuring that the provision is clearly costed, closely monitored, and its impact demonstrable. Due to strong relationships with the feeder settings and a robust transition process, leaders can gather detailed information early on. This enables the school to submit timely, accurate HNF applications in the Autumn term to ensure continuity of support.

This funding allowed the school to invest in additional staffing and extend specialist knowledge across the wider trust. In particular, this helped fund:

- A specialist teacher with deep understanding in communication and interaction needs. This teacher has responsibility for supporting staff in the mainstream school, as well as spending one day a week working in the hub.
- Sustained leadership and provision in the early years, to help identify emerging social and communication needs.

In parallel, Leaders also used a banding framework called the A-I framework, which is used in local special schools. This supported them to review pupil profiles, align provision, and ensure that resources were deployed effectively.





What does it look like in practice? (continued)

2. Professional development

The SENCO and specialist teacher developed professional development around visuals. This began with a whole-staff meeting which introduced visual communication. The session drew directly from the school's experiences, showcasing how visuals were already supporting pupils with SEND and highlighting the benefits of extending this approach more broadly. This also introduced staff to a guiding principle for this project - "visuals stay, words fly away" - which was revisited throughout.

In follow-up briefings, leaders reintroduced the mantra alongside three core aims of visual support, co-developed with the specialist teacher and informed by key frameworks including the Trust SEND Handbook and the Suffolk Mainstream Inclusion Framework:

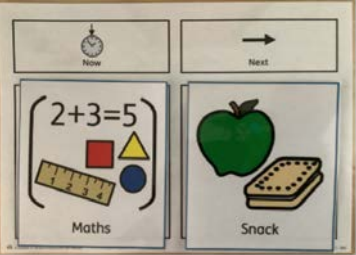


1. To help make life predictable, understandable and positive.
2. To help manage change and transitions.
3. To help pupils share information, make choices, and express their wants and needs.

Weekly training sessions led by the SENCO and Hub teacher, aimed to help staff put this into practice, building their knowledge and confidence using visuals in the classroom. During the training, leaders prioritised practical implementation of visuals: modelling strategies, sharing real-life examples from the school's specialist hub, and including reflection activities on how to make visuals meaningful and purposeful in everyday practice. Leaders also provided opportunities for support staff to spend time in the specialist hub to see this in practice.

What does it look like in practice? (continued)

3. Embedding visuals in classroom practice

Visual supports were embedded into everyday classroom practice. These include:

Visual	Example
<p>Now-next-then boards to support pupils to understand transitions.</p>	
<p>Choice boards, with boxes to represent different activities pupils' can select.</p>	
<p>Sign of the week, to support pupils to learn a new Makaton sign and symbol.</p>	

Other examples of visuals promoted across classrooms to support shared communication, are:

- Communication mats, which aim to support pupils to communicate their wants and needs by using clear and simple pictures.
- Transition booklets, which aim to support pupils moving from reception to year 1.

To deepen reflection and personalise implementation, leaders also asked staff to complete an audit of their use of visuals, asking:

- What visuals do I use?
- When and how do I use them?
- Who are they for?

This process was integrated into the school's ongoing whole-school monitoring cycle. Leaders provided feedback on whole-school progress, highlighting areas of success and offering guidance for improvement. Where necessary, individual staff members received support to make further developments. Leaders also encouraged staff to use visuals not only for pupils who require them but also for those who may choose to benefit from them.



What does it look like in practice? (continued)

3. Embedding visuals in classroom practice (continued)

To sustain momentum and visibility, leaders introduced coaching and peer support around the use of visuals. They also established regular communication channels to share, celebrate, and reinforce inclusive practice, including:

- **SEND Snippets:** Weekly bulletins with tips, tools, and resources
- **SEND Shout-Outs:** Celebrating inclusive practice spotted across the school



What has been the impact?

Impact on pupils' communication

Leaders have measured pupils' progress in communication through Language Link assessments.

They took baseline data from pupils in Autumn 2023, when they were in reception. They then re-tested these pupils in Autumn 2024, when they were in year 1, following the introduction of visual supports. This found:

- That the proportion of pupils at the borderline or expected range of communication rose from 43% to 60%
- 65% of these pupils who had moved into the expected or borderline range had accessed at least a term of embedded visual support.
- Over the same period, the proportion of pupils assessed as having severe language difficulties fell from 23% to 11%, and those with moderate difficulties dropped from 23% to 19%.
- The average raw score of pupils also increased by 13 marks and the average standardised score rose by 9 points, indicating significant progress in pupils' communication skills.

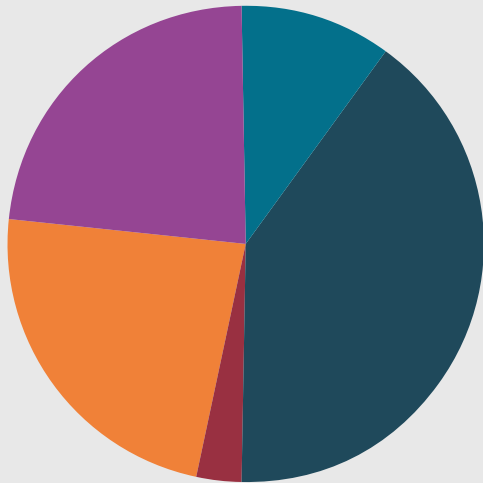
This information is also represented on the charts and table on page 12.



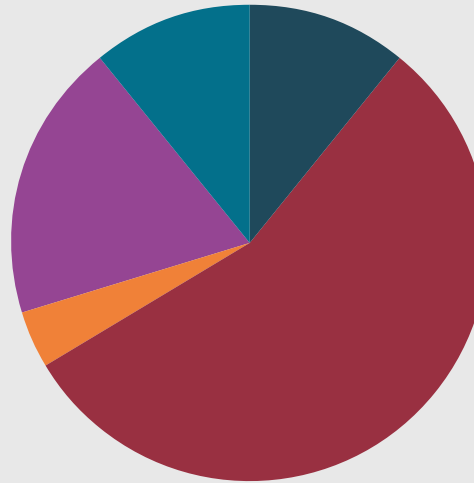
What has been the impact? (continued)

Impact on pupils' communication (continued)

End of Autumn Term 2023
(Reception)



End of Autumn Term 2024
(Year 1)



- Severe difficulty (0<6th percentile)
- Moderate difficulty (6<16th percentile)
- Borderline (16th<22nd percentile)
- Expected range (22nd<100th percentile)
- Not assessed

	Autumn 2023 (Reception)	Autumn 2024 (Year 1)
Expected Range	40%	56%
Borderline	3%	4%
Moderate Difficulty	23%	19%
Severe Difficulty	23%	11%
Not Assessed (unable to access assessment)	10%	11%



What has been the impact? (continued)

Impact on pupils' emotional regulation and behaviour

While this approach was primarily intended to support pupils' communication and interaction needs, in practice leaders report this has had a wider benefit for pupils with other needs.

- Visual tools have supported pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs to understand expectations, engage calmly, and behave positively during transitions.
- In parallel to introducing visual tools such as the 'now-next-then' boards, leaders reviewed the mainstream timetable to build in greater predictability and allow more time for pupils to process information, which has supported pupils on the autistic spectrum.

Leaders have observed a reduction in episodes of dysregulation, supported by pupil voice feedback. Pupils have reported that the use of visual supports has helped them manage their emotions more effectively.

Since implementing visual supports, leaders have also observed positive changes in pupil behaviour. The number of behaviour incidents logged on the school's system has decreased.

	Autumn 23 and Spring 24 Terms	Autumn 24 and Spring 25 Terms
Number of recorded incidents with the tag 'Behaviour'	1363	1060

Staff attribute this reduction in behaviour incidents to improved pupil understanding and emotional regulation as a result of the visual strategies. As pupils became better able to anticipate routines, understand expectations, and communicate their needs using visuals, staff report they were less likely to feel frustrated, conflicted or distressed.



Next steps

Leaders are now focused on:

- Ensuring visuals are used in a consistent way across settings, by sharing effective strategies and collective approaches through regular conferences and professional learning forums.
- Extending the use of visuals into key stage 2, in both discreet and age-appropriate ways, to ensure older pupils can still access support without stigma.
- Engaging parents with the use of visuals, by sharing this in the SEND information reports provided to all families.
- Expanding other elements of the hub's specialist curriculum to mainstream settings, including the hub's Severe Learning Difficulties curriculum.

The key factors that make it work

Leaders have identified the following key behaviours and content which have made this approach effective in their setting.

- **Specialist expertise:** Leaders prioritised investing in a specialist teacher, who could work across the mainstream school and the specialist hub. They report that this brought a deep expertise and experience around inclusion which improved the quality of the professional development around visuals. Having a single SENDCO across both the mainstream school and the specialist Hub since April 2023 has significantly improved the consistency and oversight of whole-school SEND provision. This unified role has made it easier to implement, monitor, and align strategies across settings. The combined experience in both mainstream and specialist environments also brings valuable credibility to the role.
- **Focus on practical classroom strategies.** Training sessions were deliberately designed to model simple strategies and showcase real-life examples drawn from their own classrooms.
- **Ongoing professional development.** Leaders recognised that lasting change could not come from a single professional development session. Instead, leaders invested in practical, ongoing training, ensuring staff had repeated opportunities to build confidence, reflect on their practice, and adapt over time.
- **The role of leadership:** When senior leaders and the SENCO actively modelled the use of visuals and reinforced their importance, they report that this helped create new norms.





Advice for school leaders

Leaders have reflected on lessons learnt along the way, to support others looking to implement similar practices in their settings.

Leaders reflected that some colleagues were initially hesitant to use visuals, often perceiving them as time-consuming or unnecessary for certain pupils. Leaders aimed to anticipate these concerns and create space for open, honest conversations. They report that acknowledging different staff perspectives built trust, and supported meaningful professional development. Sharing stories of pupils who had visibly benefited particularly those with communication or behavioural needs also helped shift mindsets and create early buy-in.

Leaders also note the importance of allowing time for training, reflection, and sustained implementation, recognising that change takes time to become embedded in daily practice. Progress was celebrated, not just for its impact on pupils, but for what it said about the school's commitment to inclusion and continual improvement.

Further reading and resources

Leaders have shared some examples of resources they consulted throughout this process, which they would recommend other school and trust leaders to consider in their own contexts.

- See the [Speech and Language Link website](#) to learn more about the Language Link standardised assessment this school used.
- See [Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools | EEF](#) Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools guidance report, 2020). This discusses the use of scaffolding and visual prompts explicitly.
- See the [Widgit website](#) to learn more about the Widgit symbols that can help pupils with text and communication.
- See the [‘Now, Next, Then’ visual task board provided by Tes](#) to explore a specific visual tool that teachers used in this school.
- See the [ET foundation’s SEN Support Resource](#) for information and research on a wide range of practices around SEND in schools.



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