

Case Study:

Cumbria Education Trust





Background information

Trust: Cumbria Education Trust

Director of learning provision: Sue Newstead

About the trust: Cumbria Education Trust was set up in 2015 as William Howard Trust, when its first academy – William Howard School – sponsored Workington Academy. Renamed in 2017, today Cumbria Education Trust has 12 primaries, five secondaries and a sixth-form college, educating more than 6,000 pupils across Cumbria.

SEN pupils: 14% (secondary) and 20% (primary)

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 28% (secondary) and 34% (primary)

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 2% (secondary) and 10% (primary)

MAT Progress 8 score: -0.2

Key stage 2: 63% of pupils meeting expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 (*provisional 2025 data*)

Data has been taken from <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables> at time of publication (July 2025) and updated with trusts as needed for accuracy. Definitions of categories are also available through the same site.



Why is this important?

The guiding principle at Cumbria Education Trust has always been to look at the impact of educational measures and to ask repeatedly: “Do we need to change anything? What does the research tell us?”

An issue that quickly became apparent was that, while there was an expectation for children with SEND to have a teaching assistant at their side for extended periods throughout the school day, this was not having the intended impact.

“We had a real conflict happening over the number of hours teaching assistants were expected to be attached to the child,” says Sue Newstead, the trust’s director of learning provision.

“And the [national] research told us that the TA impact in the lesson was variable, and in some cases could be negative. We really took that on board and said: ‘OK, what are we doing, then?’”



What challenges were you trying to address?

Initially, the trust simply wanted to clarify what SEND provision looked like in its schools. So Mrs Newstead decided to put together a SEND toolkit for teachers, itemising all the strategies and interventions that a child may (or may not) respond to in the classroom.

“It was an attempt to engage teachers in really thinking about what provision could look like in the classroom – what a TA might be directed to do by the teachers,” she says. “We were trying to get them to take ownership of what additional provision – not just hours of TA time – the child was getting.”

Mrs Newstead divided the toolkit into different sections, allocating one section to each of her SENCOs, who are trained classroom teachers and middle or senior leaders. For example, a SENCO who is skilled in speech, language and communication was given the relevant section to create working with teaching

staff. One of the trust’s schools has a physical-medical provision, so its SENCO was asked to compile the physical-medicine section.

“That was such a powerful exercise – not just handing them an overview and saying, ‘This is what your class needs,’” says Ms Newstead, “but for them to work with us and say, ‘We think this is what the class needs.’”

The SENCOs were painstakingly precise in the guidance they gave, because they were aware that they were writing for other class teachers in the trust.

Ms Newstead then added a notes section to the end of the document, so that staff could record what was working – or not working – for children in their own classroom, as well as anything they needed to think about or remember along the way.

“We were really saying: ‘This is not a prescription. This is not a magic wand,’”





What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

says Ms Newstead. “We’re saying, ‘Try these things, and then make a note of what’s right for your children.’

“What we’ve found as we’ve gone along is that different conditions present in different ways in different subject lessons. So, particularly in the secondary sector now, where the children are moving from class to class and subject to subject, we need to do the next piece of work, which will be: what does autism look like in a practical subject? A chemistry lesson is very different from an English lesson.”

When the toolkit was implemented, trust staff were provided with training over six weeks, to ensure that they

understood its purpose and intended use. And the toolkit is continually reviewed and amended, as new children join the school and staff develop expertise in new areas.

The process of drawing up and thinking about the toolkit, however, also consolidated the trust’s thinking about SEND. It emphasised that what mattered most was not the fact of the teaching assistant in the room, but the provision that the teacher – working together with the teaching assistant – was able to offer each child.

And so the trust developed a new mantra for SEND: “Provision, not hours”.

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Sue Newstead, Cumbria Education Trust Director of Learning Provision

What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

The approach:

The aim of “Provision, not hours” as an approach was to switch the emphasis away from the number of hours that a teaching assistant spent with a child with SEND, towards the specific interventions that the child would need and how the school could provide those.

The teacher toolkit provided SENCOs, class teachers and senior leaders monitoring quality in classrooms with a list of potential strategies and interventions – but the individual SENCOs would obviously know best which of those strategies would work for their own cohorts. “The tool is obviously generic across the trust,” Mrs Newstead says. “I wanted to see if they could use the toolkit to be more precise about the individuals in front of them.”

She therefore asked the trust’s SENCOs to bullet point the provision sections of their pupils’ EHCPs.

The goal was to be as precise as possible, so as to help teachers and teaching assistants to be equally precise with their classroom practice.

SENCOs then presented classroom teachers with a map of provision: the support each child with SEND needed to be given, rather than the number of hours of teaching-assistant time they would be allocated. “So all the time you’re talking about the provision, not about the TA,” says Mrs Newstead. “It might be the TA who’s providing the support, but all the time you are talking about what you are providing, rather than the time the TA has in class.”

They then examined what those requirements actually meant in practice: for example, additional vocabulary work could mean simply highlighting key words and asking pupils to verbalise them back to you. Once phrased like that, teachers began to see how one teaching assistant could unobtrusively

walk around the class and provide this support for all the children who needed it.

The teacher was then able to think: “These five children all need this provision – which will be relevant to today’s lesson. So I’ll group them together during this activity, and the teaching assistant will be able to help them all unobtrusively.”

This also made it easier for the teacher to explain to parents how their child was being given the provision they needed – without five teaching assistants simultaneously reading out the same set of words for five different children.

Initially, the decision to cut down on the number of teaching assistants in the classroom was not budget-related: the trust did not make any members of staff redundant, though some teaching assistants who left were not replaced. “It’s about the precision of the focus in the classroom – what the support was about,” Mrs Newstead says. “It’s about the quality.”

What does it look like in practice?

Together with classroom teachers, Mrs Newstead looked at the trust's teaching scope and sequence document and asked: "If this is what we're asking teachers to do at any given moment, what do we want the teaching assistants to be doing at the same time?"

For example, where teachers were putting in place routines for the start and end of the lesson, the teaching assistant should be reinforcing these same routines, emphasising that the routines are there for everybody, including children with SEND.

Occasionally, teaching assistants' experience meant that they had additional insights into a pupil's needs. The teachers and teaching assistants were therefore encouraged to work as a team. So, for example, the teacher might ask all the children in the class to take notes during a lesson. But the teaching assistant would know that a child with

dyslexia would struggle to understand the lesson if they were taking notes at the same time. The teacher and teaching assistant would therefore decide together that the child could just take a photograph of a classmate's notes, or perhaps the teaching assistant could take notes on the child's behalf.

"They're helping the child get where they need to be," says Mrs Newstead. "They're ironing out together how best to help the children in front of them."

Where a teacher was providing explicit instruction, the role of the teaching assistant would be to check in on pupils with speech and language difficulties, who may need something explained to them. They could therefore go and ask the pupil to repeat the instructions back to them, checking for understanding.

Some secondary school teachers were concerned that only having one teaching assistant in the classroom would make it difficult for children with social, emotional



What does it look like in practice? (continued)

and mental health issues to self-regulate. Mrs Newstead discussed this with the SENCOs, and they resolved that they would have one teaching assistant in the classroom and another on call. The on-call teaching assistant could then use the lesson to complete other tasks, and only come into the classroom if needed.

“It meant that we could empower the classroom TA to say, ‘I can see that three children in this class are bubbling, I really need to do something,’” says Mrs Newstead. “So they call for the on-call TA to take them out, just to have a chat. We do it in a nice proactive way, rather than ‘You’ve been put out of the class.’ And then they can bring them back in. So they’re not out for the full lesson.”

Initially, the shift in emphasis – and language used – was a change for all staff members. To prepare for parents’ evenings, staff were given additional training. “Because if you went to a parent’s evening where a child wasn’t doing as well as the parent wanted, it would quite quickly revert back to

‘Where’s the TA and what does the TA do?’” says Mrs Newstead. “We had to equip our teachers to be able to deal with those kind of conversations without it escalating.”

Now, if a parent were to ask, “Who’s my child’s one to one?” the teacher would reply, “The key worker for your child is...”

“Because really what they’re wanting is a key contact,” says Mrs Newstead. “Parents like to have a key person they talk to, so that they don’t have to keep repeating the same things over and over again to different people.”

“You think about what they’re really asking, and then change the language. If you talk in a different way, parents usually respond back using similar language.”

This was complemented by ongoing professional development, reviewing the impact of the new approach and the teacher toolkit, and ensuring that they remained at the forefront of everyone’s minds.

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What has been the impact?

An ImpactEd study in 2021-22 found that the SEND teacher toolkit was making a positive difference to the quality of teaching for pupils with SEND. It had also had a positive impact on teachers' confidence in adapting lessons to meet these pupils' needs. Ofsted inspectors have also commented on the precise way that provision is matched to pupils' needs.

In 2023-24, 13 out of 34 primary pupils with SEND achieved the expected standard in reading in their key stage 2 tests; 14 out of 34 achieved the expected standard in maths. And five pupils with SEND were found to be working at greater depth in English or maths in their key





What has been the impact? (continued)

stage 2 tests. Two pupils with severe learning difficulties attained consistent scores in reading and maths.

Parent and staff surveys also reflect an improvement in provision. School staffrooms display cards and letters from parents pleased with how their children with SEND are performing.

There has also been a reduction in complaints from parents and at parents' evenings. "I think the conversations are less emotive – the conversations are just focused on the provision, which is what we're all trying to do," says Mrs Newstead. "Is this the right provision for your child? Do you think that's working?"



What have been the key factors that make it work, and what advice would you give to other school leaders?

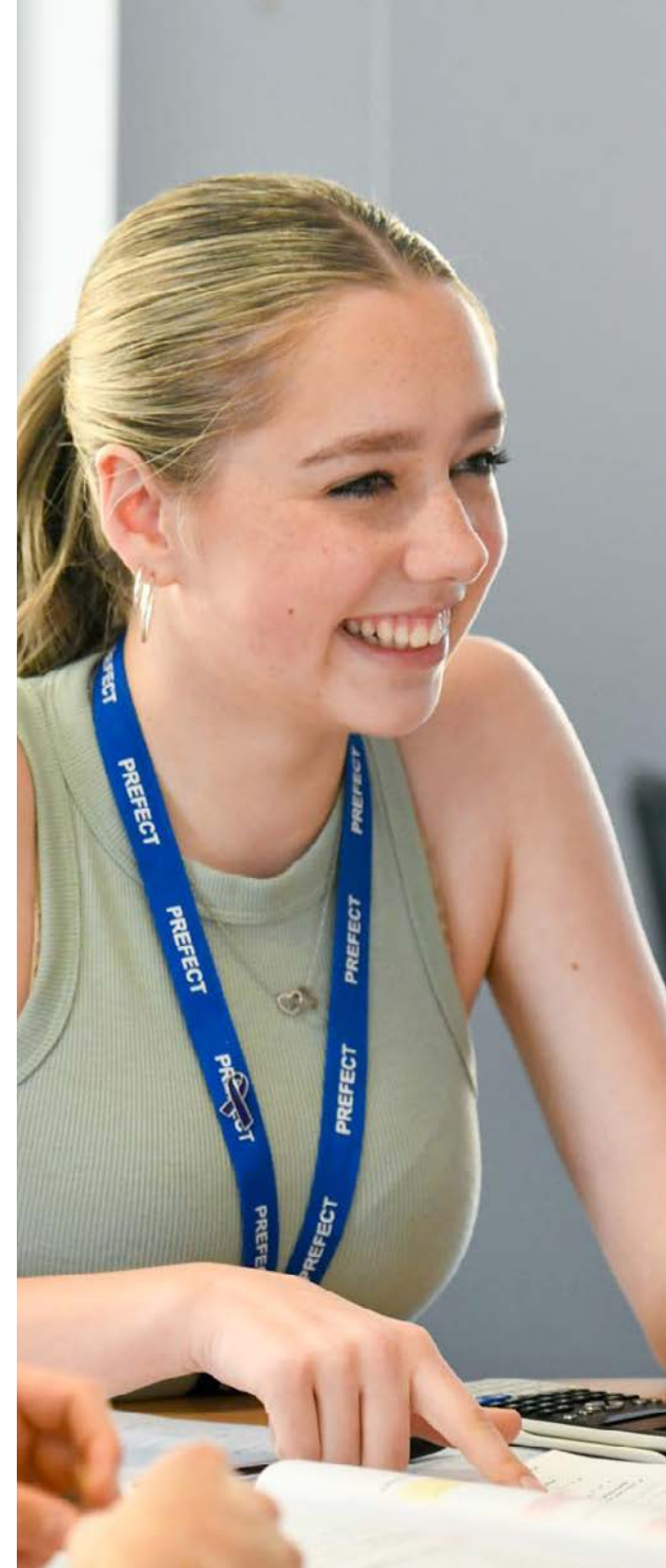
In order to implement lasting change, the trust believes that it is important to explain the rationale for the change to staff and parents. If they understand the why, they will be more accepting of the how.

Inviting teachers to write the SEND teacher toolkit was therefore an important way to ensure that they were invested in the new strategy. It allowed teachers to take ownership of the project, and to share their expertise. “There’s nothing worse than for me to come and say, ‘This is how it should look day-to-day,’” says Mrs Newstead. “Especially when I might not have a full overview of their day-to-day workload.

“So I say: do it in the way that suits your skills best. Then we will learn from each other, and we will share documentation. We will share experiences, we’ll share our research.”

But, she adds, “You can’t just assume that people understand what that document means.” And so the launch of the toolkit was accompanied by training and professional-development workshops.

A process of constant revision means that the toolkit is kept up-to-date and relevant. This cycle of revision ensures that the toolkit remains at the forefront of everyone’s mind, rather than languishing forgotten in a drawer. These revision and reminder sessions also enable teachers to share their notes, discussing how (and whether) different strategies worked for them, and offloading stresses or anxieties where relevant.





What have been the key factors that make it work, and what advice would you give to other school leaders? (continued)

Similarly, any changes in language need to be reinforced at regular intervals, otherwise staff will default back to the language they have always used. “That’s why I bring the SENCOs together,” says Mrs Newstead. “Because the SENCOs are my advocates out there, keeping everything live.”

Equally, parents need to be kept informed about any changes and new strategies. Cumbria Education Trust has a parent-engagement framework, which lays out the expected standards for all trust schools. The trust now

plans to add more detail into this document about how it engages with parents of children with SEND.

“There’s a real desire among staff to get it right – to make sure that children are getting the right provision,” says Mrs Newstead. “And to get it right for parents, who have a lot of concerns about their children coming into mainstream school with lots of different needs. There’s a lot more to consider when you’re working with parents of children with certain needs.”

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Resources

- [CET SEND teacher toolkit](#)
- [CET parent engagement framework](#)



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