

Creating Meaningful Work Experience Opportunities for Young People with SEND



This toolkit is designed to support Careers Leaders and Educators by offering practical guidance, resources, and best practice for delivering meaningful work experience for learners with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

It will explore successful models of work experience, as well as employer engagement techniques and management to best support learners with SEND.

The South Midlands Careers Hub would like to thank Stacey Morris (Community and Employer Engagement Manager at Creating Tomorrow Partnership) and Lee Nelson (Careers Leader at Woodlands Secondary School, Luton) with supporting and contributing to this toolkit, sharing their knowledge and expertise.

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Part 1

Gatsby Benchmark 6: Meaningful Workplace Experiences

Gatsby Benchmark 6: Meaningful Workplace Experiences specifies that 'Every learner should have first-hand experiences of workplaces to help their exploration of career opportunities and expand their networks.' This section will explore Benchmark 6 in more detail, including considerations for educators when implementing experiences for learners with SEND.

Criteria for Schools

- By the age of 16, every pupil should have had meaningful experiences of workplaces.
- By the age of 18, every pupil should have had at least one further meaningful experience.

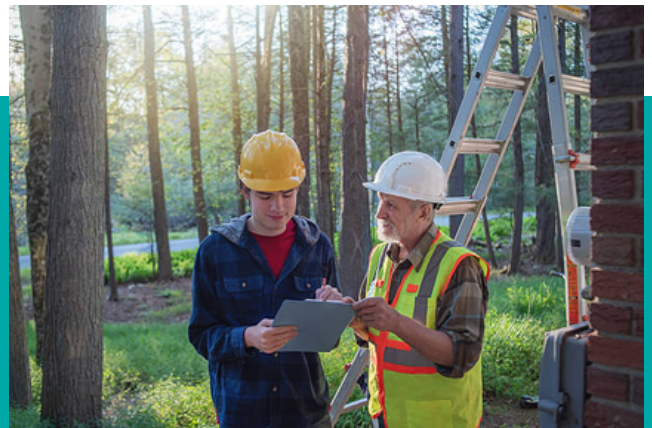
Criteria for Colleges

- By the end of their programme of study, every learner should have had at least one meaningful experience of a workplace, in addition to any part-time jobs they may have.

Definition of 'Meaningful'

Meaningful work experiences help learners:

- Explore a workplace environment
- Understand what skills are valued
- Learn about the employer's recruitment process
- Understand what it takes to be successful



Gatsby Benchmark 6 details the criteria for a meaningful work experience, which will:

- have a clear purpose, which is shared with the employer and the young person
- be underpinned by learning outcomes that are appropriate to the needs of the young person
- involve extensive two-way interactions between the young person and employees
- include opportunities for young people to meet a range of different people from the workplace
- include opportunities for young people to perform a task set by the employer or to produce a piece of work relevant to that workplace
- include the employer providing feedback to the young person about their work
- be followed by opportunities for the young person to reflect on the insights, knowledge or skills gained through their experience.

A SEND Lens

Nationally, adults with learning disabilities face severe employment challenges, with only around [6% of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority in England being in paid work](#). Workplace experiences raise aspirations and encourages learners to understand the options available to them, as highlighted in the [Statutory Guidance for Careers Education](#). Therefore, it is essential that all learners, particularly those with SEND, are provided with meaningful and accessible workplace experiences to help improve their employment outcomes and long-term independence.

A 'Meaningful' Experience for SEND

With 'SEND' representing a diverse range of needs, educators should be encouraged to use their professional judgement when designing meaningful work experiences, and ensure a tailored approach. For learners with SEND, it is recognised that:

- Additional or different support may be needed
- Experiences may look different, depending on the learner's individual needs
- The 'workplace' model may not work for all learners

As such, educators may be required to interpret the [definition of meaningful](#) in a way that is individualised and appropriate for their learner with SEND, particularly for some cohorts in special school settings.



Tools For Support

[Vocational Profiling](#)

Vocational profiling helps identify a learner's interests, strengths and support needs, allowing more personalised and well-matched workplace experiences.

[Careers & Enterprise Company: Resources for SEND Specialists](#)

Resources to support educators with delivering the Gatsby Benchmarks for learners with SEND, including Benchmark 6.

[IncludED Careers: Benchmark 6 Analysis for SEND](#)

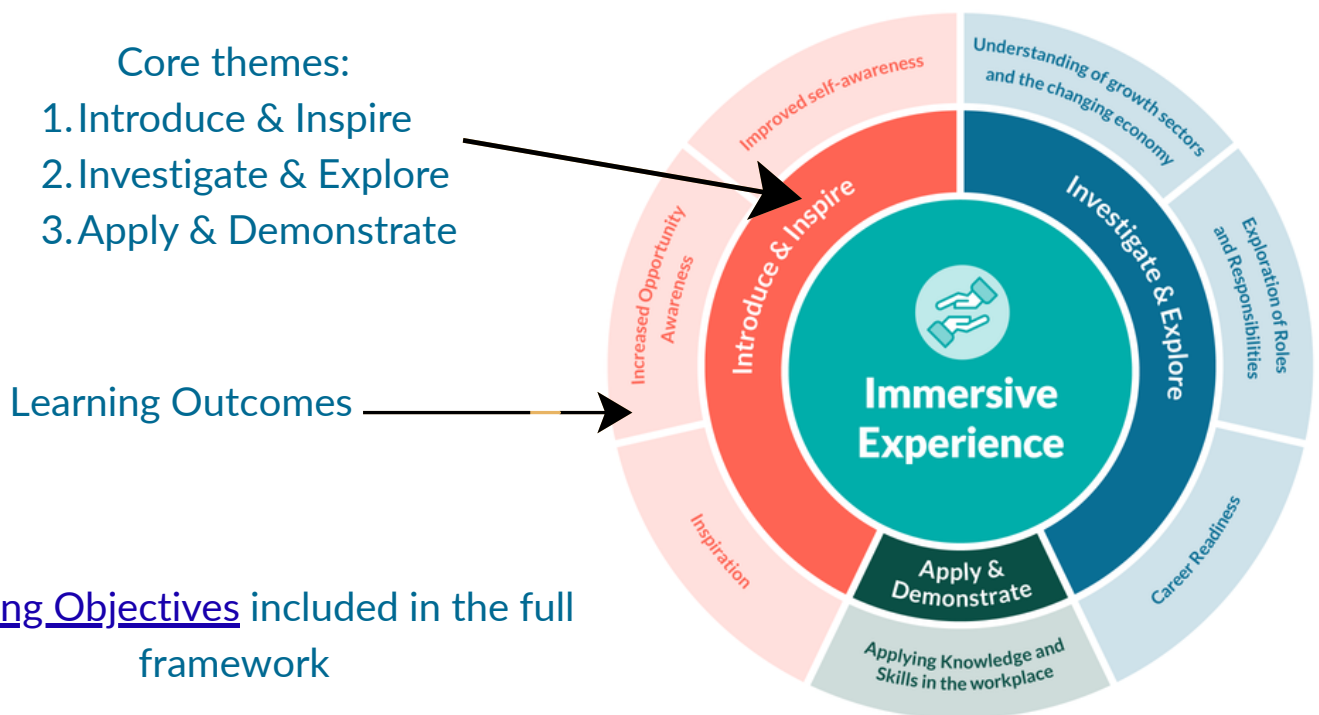
This resource highlights key considerations, challenges and opportunities for inclusive practice in mainstream and specialist settings.

Part 2

The Equalex Framework

To effectively design meaningful work experience opportunities for learners with SEND, it is important to begin with a clear framework. The following section introduces [Equalex](#), which is a national framework developed by the Careers & Enterprise Company to help educators and employers deliver high-quality, progressive and meaningful work experiences.

The framework consists of learning outcomes and objectives to guide what young people should gain from each experience, starting early (from Key Stage 3) and building on each one.



How can Equalex support learners with SEND?

Equalex is designed to be inclusive, with learning outcomes and objectives that can be interpreted flexibly depending on the needs of your learners with SEND. It can be used to:

1. Design work experience activities at different levels
2. Audit your current provision to identify gaps
3. Underpin your work experience offer to learning outcomes, supporting the *meaningful* criteria for [Gatsby Benchmark 6](#)

[IncludedED Careers](#) has developed resources on behalf of the Careers & Enterprise Company to support the delivery of Equalex for SEND.

Part 3

Effective Employer Engagement: Engaging Employers to Work With and Support Learners with SEND

Equalex provides a strong foundation for designing high-quality work experience, but its success relies heavily on meaningful collaboration with employers. This section explores how educators can engage employers effectively, and build partnerships that support positive outcomes for learners with SEND. This includes:

1. Engaging employers to offer meaningful opportunities to young people with SEND
2. Creating mutually beneficial partnerships
3. Managing relationships successfully
4. Supporting employers to meet learner needs
5. The 4PS Model: Transforming work experience

1. Engaging employers to offer meaningful opportunities to young people with SEND

Building strong employer relationships is a key component of delivering impactful work experience. Below, we have outlined tips and techniques to engage employers meaningfully.

Start with your existing networks

Build on connections you already have through families, staff and governors. Many may already work with employers who offer outreach or community engagement opportunities. Some great examples of nationally recognised employers already doing this are McDonald's, Co-Op, Go Construct, Amazon and Cummins.

 *Top Tip: Create a poster that can be shared within annual reviews, at parents evening, enterprise fayres, via newsletters or be given to families to help spread the word.*

Know your local employer landscape

Spend some time learning about what organisations are close to your setting. Map businesses by sector, size, and accessibility of roles. Use tools such as the [Employer Disability Confident Scheme](#) or [Evenbreak](#) to identify employers that are committed or already have disability confident practices in place.

 *Top Tip: Reach out at the right time – avoid peak business periods and be flexible, as employers operate on different schedules to schools. Be prepared and ready to respond to emails and meeting requests.*

Establish learner interests

Establish what your learner's interests are, use tools such as [Vocational profiling](#), [Future Skills Questionnaire](#), and match these with local industries.

💡 *Top Tip: When reaching out to employers, do your research to try and find the person within the organisation that may have CSR responsibilities, the Education team, or Early Talent team (LinkedIn can be especially helpful for this).*

Don't overlook small business

Smaller employers, such as micro-businesses or social enterprises, are often flexible and eager to support community initiatives.

💡 *Top Tip: Use local Chambers of Commerce, business networks, or employer engagement hubs to create a database of potential partners.*

Invite employers to your setting

For your first introductory meeting, invite employers into the school/college setting to meet your learners and showcase what they are capable of.

💡 *Top Tip: If appropriate, consider learner-led activities such as giving tours or hosting visits to employers to build confidence and make a strong first impression.*

Have a flexible approach

Be flexible with the different ways employers could engage with learners, for e.g.:

- sponsoring an enterprise project
- mentoring an activity
- attending as a guest speaker within a curriculum lesson
- working together on a community project
- virtual involvement

💡 *Top Tip: Develop a 'menu' of example activities employers can pick and choose from.*

Explain the bigger picture

Help employers understand the long-term value of engaging with young people with SEND. It's not just about community support, it's about developing a future, diverse workforce.



2. Creating Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

Initial engagement is only the first step. To ensure long-term success, these relationships must develop into partnerships where both the learner and the employer gain clear value.

Employer partnerships are most sustainable when both sides see clear value in the relationship. When relationships with employers are built on trust, communication, and mutual respect, work experience opportunities become far more meaningful.

Schools and colleges bring expertise in supporting young people with SEND, while employers bring real-world insight into workplace expectations and opportunities. By working together, both partners can create experiences that help young people build confidence, develop skills, and move closer to future employment.

Over time, these partnerships can grow into broader opportunities such as extended work experience placements, mentoring programmes, supported internships, and employment pathways.



Case Study: Building Long-Term Partnerships, Daventry Hill School

Through a series of conversations and ongoing relationship-building, Daventry Hill School has developed strong partnerships with local employers, some of which have been maintained for several years. These collaborations are based on shared learning and mutual respect.

School staff gain insight into industry practices, while employers take the time to understand learners and how best to support them. As cohorts change and evolve, the partnerships adapt to remain suitable for all learners, ensuring each placement continues to be meaningful.

Martin Turk, Head of HR, Simply, says:

“What’s especially rewarding is the opportunity for shared learning. While the students gain experience and confidence, their questions and outlooks often encourage us to reflect on what we do and how we do it. This programme often reminds us that supporting others can also quietly help us grow as a team.”

3. Managing Relationships with Employers

Once partnerships are established, ongoing communication and relationship management become essential to sustaining and growing these opportunities.

Nurtured relationships are more likely to lead to repeat opportunities, deeper engagement, and more inclusive practice, supporting [Gatsby Benchmark 6](#) and the [Equalex Framework](#). Explore top tips below.

Transparency and Openness	Being open and transparent from the outset helps build trust with employers and sets clear expectations. Framing information positively and highlighting the learner's strengths can help build confidence. Reassure employers that school/college staff can help provide guidance, preparation, and a clear point of contact throughout.
Keeping communication clear and professional	Clear communication helps reduce uncertainty and ensures experiences run smoothly. When contacting employers: • Use concise and accessible language, avoiding unnecessary jargon, and educational terminology. • Keep communication regular, not just transactional. • Provide a clear overview of expectations and what you are looking for, but be flexible with different ways to get engaged.
Don't make assumptions – start with a conversation	Each employer will have different motivations, capacities, and experiences. Some may already have strong inclusive practices, while others may be engaging with schools/colleges or SEND learners for the first time. Some questions you may wish to ask the employer could be: • What types of tasks could a learner realistically support with? • Do you have any concerns or questions? • What support would help you feel more confident?

For employers, involvement in work experience programmes can provide opportunities to:

- support their local community
- develop staff mentoring and leadership skills
- strengthen inclusive workplace practices
- gain insight into a diverse future workforce

Schools can help reinforce these benefits by recognising and celebrating employer contributions. To help maintain these partnerships, schools should stay in touch with employer partners. This might include:

Thank you events or recognition certificate	Highlighting employer involvement on social media, newsletters and website	Arranging occasional informal check-ins
Inviting employers to school events, careers days, workshops or celebrations	Sending updates about learner achievements	Sending seasonal greetings

Case Study: Employer Thank You Breakfast at The Bee Hive (Northgate Academy Trust)

On an annual basis, The Bee Hive Sixth Form hold an Employer Thank You Breakfast for their employer network.

The Bee Hive has built strong partnerships with a range of employers, supporting students with SEND through placements, workshops, and visits. The Employer Thank You Breakfast, which is organised with support from the students, offers an opportunity to recognise and celebrate these interactions, and gives employers a space to network, connect, and hear directly about the impact of their involvement.



4. Supporting Employers to Meet Learner's Needs

Alongside maintaining strong relationships, it is equally important to ensure employers feel confident and equipped to support learners effectively in the workplace. Below are some practical approaches that school and college settings can use to support employer:

Provide as much information in advance as possible

Sharing a learner profile or "This is Me" sheet can be extremely helpful, summarising key information such as learner's strengths/interests; communication preferences; areas for support.

Ensure the experience works alongside the employer's business needs

Successful work experience should fit realistically within the daily operations of the workplace.

Offer the opportunity for a pre-visit

If possible, arrange a pre-visit to the workplace to understand the environment and help prepare the employer with meeting learner need.

Provide guidance on simple practical adjustments

Talk through practical adjustments that can be made for the learner to help them access their experience. Talking through adjustments in advance can make a significant difference to both the learner's and the employer's confidence and overall success of the work experience.

Case Study: Co-designed Work Experience, Isebrook School

At Isebrook School, preparing learners for the future is a core focus. The school employs a full-time Work Experience Co-ordinator who dedicates time to understanding both learners and employers. This allows the school to carefully navigate placements and create partnerships that are mutually beneficial, which providing reassurance to all.

Before learners begin their placements, the Work Experience Co-ordinator works closely with employers to co-design activities, ensuring they are accessible and engaging for all students. This collaborative approach gives employers confidence in their delivery while also introducing them to inclusive practices and strategies for supporting SEND learners in the workplace. This method has worked particularly well for implementing the Equalex model, and allows flexibility and freedom for creativity, on how work experience can work for all.



5. The 4PS Model: Transforming Work Experience

Drawing on the approaches we've explored, the 4Ps Model offers a practical framework to bring these elements together and ensure work experience is structured, purposeful, and impactful, focused on four key elements: Prepare – Plan – Provide – Progress.

Prepare <i>Prepare the learner and employer</i>	Learners • Offer workplace simulations and role-play • Travel training and orientation • Mock interviews and interview preparation • “This is Me” profiles (strengths, support needs, communication style) Employer • Share learner strengths and interests • Provide simple reasonable adjustments, provide examples and offer support to implement • Set clear expectations and structure
Plan <i>Identify tasks, supervision, structure, feedback methods</i>	• Handle risk assessments, insurance, and safeguarding checks • Agree on suitable timings considering businesses pressure points • Agree learning outcomes and purpose • Plan a pre-visit • Identify tasks aligned to business operations • Plan supervision and feedback • Encourage interaction with different employees
Provide <i>Learner participates in real tasks, interacts with staff, supported by a mentor</i>	• Learners complete real tasks, not just shadowing • Mentors support learning and answer questions • Encourage two-way interaction and questions • Track progress against agreed learning outcomes
Progress <i>Reflect on learning, receive feedback, identify next steps</i>	• Employer provides constructive feedback for learners and the provider. Using an online form can help with receiving this information. • The opportunity for the learner to reflect on new skills, challenges overcome, and career insight. • Give thanks to the employer and promote on social media • Discuss the opportunity for further partnership working and reflect on the experience • Use feedback to strengthen future partnerships and experiences

Case Study: Community Engagement and Volunteering, Creating Tomorrow Trust

At Creating Tomorrow Trust, supporting the wider community and “paying it forward” is an important part of preparing learners for adulthood. The Trust actively encourages learners across all sites to understand the value of giving back and contributing to their communities.

While traditional work experience placements may not be suitable for every learner, community involvement and volunteering can provide meaningful opportunities to develop skills, confidence, and independence. Recognising this, Creating Tomorrow Trust has developed partnerships with local organisations such as The Lewis Foundation.

Through this partnership, different sites across the Trust work together to support a range of collaborative activities. These have included learners organising and delivering fundraising events, attending sessions with the charity to help pack gift packages for hospital patients, and taking part in enterprise challenges in support of the foundation.

These experiences allow learners to develop valuable skills such as teamwork, communication, planning, and problem-solving; while also helping them understand the positive impact they can have within their community.

If you are struggling to find employers to work with, it is worth exploring volunteering opportunities in your local area. Many of which can give the same insights, and skills development with an employer encounter.



Part 4

Examples of Work Experience and Enterprise for Learners with SEND from the South Midlands Careers Hub

To support implementation in your own setting, this section showcases a variety of successful work experience and enterprise models that have been used with learners with SEND at settings across the South Midlands Careers Hub.

Oak Bank School and Willmott Dixon

Oak Bank School, a specialist Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) provision in Leighton Buzzard, partnered with construction company Willmott Dixon, who were delivering a major local leisure centre project. Recognising students' interest in practical, hands-on careers, the partnership aimed to introduce Year 11 and 12 learners to the construction industry and local labour market opportunities over multiple sessions.

Willmott Dixon delivered an initial employability session exploring the construction sector, followed by a practical STEM workshop where students developed teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills through hands-on tasks. Finally, students visited the live construction, offering students the chance to observe the workplace environment and meet employees.

This programme provided meaningful employer encounters and work experience, helping students build confidence, develop employability skills, and gain real insight into careers within their local area.

This approach is particularly effective for learners with SEMH because it is practical, structured, and relationship-based. Delivery in small, planned stages, helps reduce anxiety and build familiarity with the employer over time. Additionally, starting with in-school sessions before progressing to a site visit creates a sense of safety and predictability, which is important for many learners with SEMH.



Weatherfield Academy and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo

The South Midlands Careers Hub funded a project with ZSL Whipsnade Zoo, delivering the 'SEN Jobs at the Zoo' programme for Year 9–11 students from Weatherfield Academy, a special school in Dunstable. The aim was to help learners explore the wide range of careers within a zoo environment, aligned to the 'Investigate & Explore' stage of the Equalex model.

Delivered over five weeks, a group of 8 students attended weekly sessions during one morning per week to experience different roles, including:

- Conservation
- Zookeeping and animal care
- Veterinary care
- Retail
- Horticulture

Each session combined a short introduction with hands-on activities, employer-led tasks, and opportunities to meet staff. A pre-visit helped familiarise students with the environment, and sessions followed a consistent structure to support engagement and confidence.

This model is effective because it is gradual, structured, and immersive. Spreading sessions over several weeks prevents learners from becoming overwhelmed and allows them to build confidence and familiarity with both the environment and staff. The consistent session format also provides predictability and routine, which supports engagement and reduces anxiety.



Enterprise projects are effective for learners with SEND, as they allow learners to take on roles that match their strengths, build confidence in a supported environment, and develop key employability skills.

Woodlands Secondary School is a special school in Luton, supporting young people with a range of physical and learning needs. Their Careers Leader, Lee Nelson, has developed various, creative opportunities for enterprise as a means of meaningful and appropriate work experience, whilst supporting learners to engage and participate in their local community, and build their skills for life.

Young Green Briton Challenge

Students from Year 9 - Year 13 took part in the Young Green Briton Challenge, aimed to help them understand environmental concerns, and to develop an enterprise project creating an eco-friendly product.

Young Green Briton delivered four sessions covering key areas of the challenge - food waste, biodiversity, recycling and fast fashion. Each class chose an area to address and proposed a project to address it.

One idea, to address fast fashion, was to make 'Rag-Rug' handbags by weaving with string and turn-up strips of waste garments, using handmade looms. Students were involved in weaving, plaiting strips, tying and knotting various recycled materials, and were encouraged to make decisions on design, colour, strips used, and names for branding.

Throughout the project, students collaborated and were supported to work as part of a team. They also gained experience in planning, marketing, and selling their work, including via a sealed-bid auction, which also helped them build communication and organisational skills.

Overall, the project gave students the opportunity to develop practical crafting skills, particularly in textile work, while also introducing the idea of turning creative activities into potential sources of income. It encouraged students to see crafting not only as a productive skill but also as a hobby they could continue outside of school.

One Year 13 student in particular showed strong engagement, becoming highly skilled in weaving and independently completing two bags. Staff supported the student and their family with guidance on continuing the craft after leaving school, including the possibility of selling handmade items at craft fairs or online. This advice was well received and may lead to a meaningful hobby or small business.



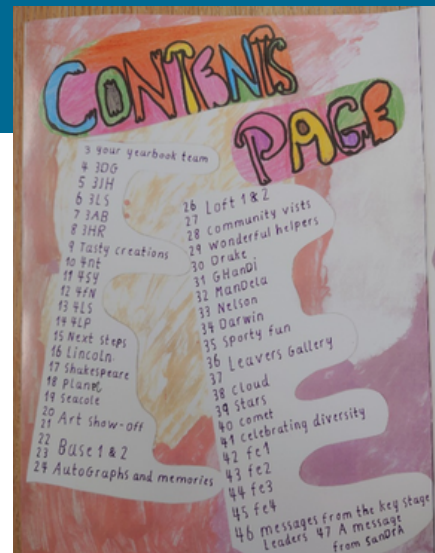
Yearbook

Yearbook was a student-led project delivered over 12 weeks, involving a weekly Careers Group of 20 students across various year groups. The aim of the project was to expose students to creative careers, whilst developing transferable skills in the means of an enterprise. Students took on defined roles based on their strengths, interests and skills, including:

- Photographers - responsible for taking photos of staff and students for the yearbook
- Journalists - responsible for interviewing staff and students, writing short articles for feature pages
- Artists - responsible for drawing portraits for those who don't have photos, and page headers
- Designers - responsible for designing front and back covers, leading on page layout and style

Students visited over 30 classes and staff teams to conduct photoshoots, interviews and collect content, while also designing layouts, writing copy, creating portraits, and developing feature pages. The final product was a 48-page printed yearbook, which culminated in a launch event for students to showcase their work.

This project built student's confidence and sense of ownership, and offered an opportunity to link careers education wider curriculum areas.



Stall in the Mall

A group of students in Post-16 undertook an enterprise project involving planning and running a stall at a local shopping precinct, supporting students to apply their skills in customer service, project management and marketing in a real-life context.

Tasks for students included conducting market research within the precinct to identify suitable products and customer preferences, then focusing on product creation, branding and pricing, and designing promotional materials. Their products included crafts and artwork.

The team also developed marketing strategies using posters and social media, learning how to effectively promote an event to a target audience. On the day, students set up and ran the stall, interacted with customers, managed transactions, and evaluated their success. The project concluded with reflection and celebration of their achievements.

Story-Party Project

The Story-Party Project brought together four community organisations, including Woodlands Secondary School, Lea Manor High School's SEND Nurture Group, AMGiving Back, and Marsh Farm Outreach. The aim was to support students with engaging with the community and developing independence, supporting Preparation for Adulthood outcomes, as well as addressing Benchmark 5 and 6 meaningfully for these young people in Years 7 - 10.

Students were split into two groups for the project. The first group held an 'Interview Tea Party' with older members of AMGiving Back, to listen to and learn about their life experiences. Students used these conversations to create stories based on the theme 'Childhood - Then and Now', across a six-week period.

The second group planned and delivered a celebratory party where the stories were shared. They organised refreshments, entertainment and a raffle for 50 guests, including older community members and parents/carers, taking place at Marsh Farm Estate.

Through the project, students developed skills in communication, planning, organisation, literacy and confidence, culminating in sharing their work through reading, presentations and dramatic performances.

Lugus Ceramics

Woodlands Secondary School has built relationships with various creative organisations, including Lugus Ceramics, who have been supporting them with a multi-year collaborative project for students, aimed at exposing them to careers in the arts and voluntary sector where appropriate.

Lugus Ceramics delivered in-school workshops across multiple weeks, focused on engaging with clay in artistic and sensory ways. At the end of the term, students developed the idea for a large-scale sculpture in the school garden, and Lugus Ceramics turned this concept into a successful funding bid, securing £20,000 for the project.

The sculptures have been designed by students and created through a mix of student and professional work. It has resulted in a lasting legacy project, providing students with a meaningful real-world creative experience.



Do you have a story to share?

The South Midlands Careers Hub is keen to continue gathering and sharing examples of effective practice from across schools. If you have a successful model of work experience for students with SEND that you would be willing to share, please email Sarah Latimer at sarah.latimer@southmidlands.org.uk or alternatively, share it with your Careers Consultant.

South Midlands Careers Hub Support

If you would like support in developing your work experience provision for learners with SEND, please contact your Careers Consultant at the South Midlands Careers Hub, and they will be able to provide guidance, share best practice, and help you design opportunities tailored to your students' needs.