

Engagement Pathway Rationale

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SEF
Five Year Plan
Year Four Horizon
Inclusion Strategy
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Pathway Rationale

*Specialist, relational and developmental curriculum for
pupils with severe and complex needs*

The Engagement Pathway is a specialist pathway for pupils whose learning, communication, regulation and relational needs require a bespoke and highly personalised developmental curriculum. It is designed for learners with severe and complex needs who are working consistently, and over time, within the early developmental range. The pathway is designed from each pupil's baseline and prioritises safety, trust, communication, regulation, engagement and meaningful progress. It provides highly tailored experiences that nurture connection, curiosity, and early cognitive, social and emotional development.

Aligned Pathway Profile

Feature	Pathway position
Curriculum Model	Fully personalised, intentionally flexible, therapeutic and developmentally sequenced
Assessment	• EHCP Outcomes (Key Stage and Yealy). • Individual Assessment Developmental Framework (IDAF), • Sensory Processing Profile • Engagement Profile • PSHEE Framework
Teaching Approach	Child-centred and holistic, engaging and relational, flexible and responsive, target driven and aspirational
Core Purpose	Safety, effective communication, emotional and physical well-being, independence, engagement and enjoyment

Overview

The Engagement Pathway provides a completely personalised and highly specialist curriculum for pupils who are working consistently over time within the early developmental range. The pathway draws on the Engagement Model, Pre-Key Stage Standards where appropriate, the PHSEE framework and highly individualised therapeutic planning.

The pathway reflects Cleaswell Hill's wider curriculum principle that pupils should be inspired, supported to discover, and empowered to become as independent and connected as possible. For Engagement pupils, this begins with emotional safety, predictable relationships and skilled co-regulation. At Cleaswell, we relate this to Maslow's theory of human motivation: for pupils with complex needs, Maslow's foundational tier — safety, trust and emotional security — is the gateway to all learning. **Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. Psychological Review.**

Many Engagement pupils experience trauma, dysregulation or sensory overwhelm, which can keep them operating in survival mode. As a result, relational safety and co-regulation are essential first steps before any meaningful curriculum engagement can occur.

Pupil Profile

Learners on this pathway typically have **Complex Learning Difficulties (CLD)** and share many characteristics with pupils with **Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)**. Their needs commonly include significant differences in communication, attention, memory, processing, sensory regulation, emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, generalisation, problem solving and relational capacity.

A significant proportion of pupils (92%) are autistic or neurodivergent and many have co-occurring differences and overlapping needs linked to trauma, disrupted attachment, sensory processing, anxiety, communication or medical complexity. Their needs are pervasive rather than isolated, which means that single diagnostic labels do not give a reliable picture of how they learn or what support they require.

Distressed behaviours, formerly challenging behaviours, are understood as communication. Staff respond through a neuroinclusive and trauma-informed lens, identifying unmet need, sensory overwhelm, communication difficulty, emotional uncertainty or reduced tolerance of others. The aim is not simply to manage behaviour, but to understand it and adapt provision so pupils are safer, calmer and more available for learning.

Intent

The intent of the Engagement curriculum is to secure the foundations that make learning possible: safety, trust, communication, regulation, attention, interaction and purposeful engagement. At Cleaswell Hill School, we believe it is essential to have a holistic approach to understanding need and designing provision that genuinely supports progress.

The curriculum aims to help pupils:

- develop reliable ways to communicate their needs and preferences
- build tolerance of adults, peers, places and routines
- increase regulation and readiness for learning
- experience success through motivating and meaningful activities
- make small but significant steps towards independence
- have access to enriching activities and experiences they enjoy, supporting happiness, comfort and emotional wellbeing

The curriculum is ambitious because it focuses on the progress that matters most for each pupil. Ambition may be seen in a pupil moving from isolated adult-led provision to shared space, from crisis-led responses to planned regulation, or from passive participation to intentional communication and choice-making.

Curriculum Design

The Engagement curriculum is bespoke, developmental and built around a deep understanding of each learner. It begins with the child: planning starts from a holistic picture of their needs, strengths, interests and motivators, developed collaboratively with teachers, therapists and families.

Each pupil's curriculum is shaped by their EHCP priority needs, baseline understanding, communication and sensory profiles, therapy guidance, PBS information and ongoing day-to-day observations of engagement. Priority targets are identified across the four EHCP areas, with some pupils working on a broad range of goals and others requiring more focused support in one or two areas for a period of time based on their ability to tolerate demand.

The curriculum is deliberately flexible and organised around key areas of learning: regulation and emotional safety; communication and interaction; cognition and problem solving; physical and sensory development; independence and self-care; social connection; and early understanding of the world. Where appropriate, learning is shaped around termly hooks or themes that introduce new experiences, broaden interests and gently reduce rigidity.

Within this framework, pupils access a personalised blend of individual programmes, small-group experiences, structured routines, sensory regulation opportunities (including hydrotherapy and rebound therapy), intensive interaction, communication programmes, music, movement, outdoor learning, community experiences and carefully adapted subject-linked learning where appropriate. For pupils with highly complex needs, Engagement Plus provides additional environments, resources and staffing to ensure their needs are met safely and meaningfully.

Implementation

Implementation is based on skilled adult interaction, predictable routines and continuous assessment of regulation and readiness. Staff use minute-by-minute professional judgement to decide when to increase demand, reduce demand, co-regulate, model, pause, redirect or change the environment.

Learning is delivered through carefully planned opportunities that are repeated, motivating and responsive. Staff create the conditions for success by using a wide range of strategies to support understanding, engagement and regulation. These include using a total communication approach, sensory resources, visual structure, modelling, appropriate physical prompting, environmental adaptations and therapeutic strategies agreed with the wider team. Together, these approaches ensure that learning is accessible, meaningful and emotionally safe for every pupil.

The learning environment is an integral part of the curriculum. Small spaces, regulation areas, low arousal approaches, consistent staffing, relational routines and carefully managed transitions are used to reduce anxiety and increase access to learning. Provision is skilled and intentional; it is therapeutic, relational and developmental.

Assessment and Achievement

Baseline assessment through the IDAF framework identifies each pupil's cognitive strengths, learning profile and areas of capability. Because many Engagement pupils make small but highly meaningful steps, their EHCP targets form the core of their curriculum, ensuring that progress is focused on what will make the greatest difference to their daily lives. The IDAF underpins these targets, helping staff select the most important priorities while also capturing each pupil's broader developmental progress over time. Engagement Profiles complement this by showing what high levels of engagement look like for each individual, helping staff recognise when pupils are motivated, regulated and ready to learn.

Assessment begins with this secure baseline, as progress cannot be understood without knowing each pupil's starting point. Staff draw on observation, IDAF information, PBS data, engagement

indicators, therapy recommendations, parental insight and professional dialogue to build a rounded picture of each learner's development.

Progress is often non-linear. Leaders therefore look for sustained change across contexts rather than one-off performance. Evidence may include increased initiation, improved recovery time, longer engagement, reduced distress, increased tolerance, new communication, greater independence or the generalisation of a skill beyond one adult or environment.

Moderation, phase discussion and input from the internal therapy team and external partners further strengthen the accuracy of assessment. The focus remains on what the pupil can now do, the conditions that enabled this success, and the next small, meaningful step that will have the greatest impact.

Integrated Therapy and Inclusion

Integrated therapy is central to the pathway. The integrated therapy team (including highly specialist SaLT and OT) provides training, guidance and personalised support. Strategies to support speech, language and communication, physical development, independence skills and sensory/emotional regulation are woven into the daily practice.

Multi-disciplinary assessment informs personalised provision including enabling environments and assistive equipment/approaches within a total communication environment.

Inclusion within the Engagement Pathway means pupils receive the environment, relationships and specialist approaches they need to belong. For some pupils, inclusion is not immediate exposure to larger groups; it is the carefully planned development of tolerance, safety and connection so that wider participation becomes possible over time.

Close collaboration with parents, external partners (CYPS, Intensive Positive Behaviour Support Team, Social Care and Respite Care Staff) is strengthened by the multi-disciplinary approach in school.

Personal Development and Preparation for Adulthood

Preparation for Adulthood in Senior Engagement is embedded across the curriculum through practical, real-life experiences such as cooking, community visits, shopping, hydrotherapy, and sensory activities. These develop key life skills, including personal care, independence in dressing, and confidence in community contexts (e.g. road safety, choice-making, and simple transactions).

Achievement is supported through OCR Life and Living Skills, with units adapted to individual needs and delivered through practical activities. Each half term, learners focus on a unit linked to the wider curriculum, ensuring coherence and opportunities to revisit and apply skills. Progress is evidenced through observation, participation, and recorded outcomes.

For learners with complex needs, a cyclical curriculum enables repetition and consolidation of key skills in familiar contexts. Progress is seen in increased independence, reduced prompts, improved consistency, and transfer of skills across contexts.

Person-centred planning, supported by Northumberland County Council and delivered in school by a Careers Advisor and PfA Lead, ensures learners' aspirations, needs, and voices inform personalised plans for future independence.

Transition

Transitions (both daily and yearly) are carefully planned because change can be a significant barrier for pupils on this pathway. Movement between rooms, staff, activities, phases or sites are minimised where possible and when necessary, they are prepared through visual support, where appropriate, repeated exposure, familiar adults, gradual steps and careful communication with families.

Transition planning is person-centred and draws on EHCP outcomes, current regulation needs, therapy advice, and evidence of the conditions in which each pupil learns best. Transitions are carefully managed with close parental input and collaboration from key agencies as part of a multi-disciplinary approach. The aim is for transitions to feel safe, predictable, and supportive rather than abrupt or compliance-led, ensuring pupils can move between activities and environments with confidence.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance must take account of the complexity of the pathway. Leaders do not judge learning superficially or only through formal lesson structures. They consider baseline, engagement, regulation, communication, adult interaction, environmental fit, therapy implementation and whether provision is enabling meaningful progress.

Leaders triangulate lesson visits, pupil profiles, Earwig evidence, progress towards EHCP outcomes, behaviour and regulation information, therapy records, family views, staff discussion and pupil voice wherever possible. This gives a realistic picture of the difference provision is making.

Impact

The intended impact is that pupils are safer, better regulated, more connected and increasingly able to communicate, participate and learn. Pupils make meaningful progress from individual starting points, even where that progress is small, fragile or non-linear.

Successful impact is seen when pupils show greater trust, increased engagement, improved tolerance, more purposeful communication, reduced barriers to learning, more independence and wider participation in school life. The curriculum enables pupils with profound complexity to have a route to achievement, dignity and belonging.

Concise Narrative

The Engagement Pathway demonstrates that Cleaswell Hill has designed a specialist curriculum around the real needs of its most complex learners. Leaders understand that progress for these pupils starts with safety, trust, regulation and communication. Provision is not custodial; it is skilled, therapeutic and developmental. Assessment begins at baseline and captures small, meaningful steps over time, using EHCP outcomes, IDAF, Earwig, Engagement Model evidence, and therapy-informed professional judgement. The pathway shows inclusion through the right environment, the right relationships and the right adaptations, enabling pupils to experience dignity, belonging and genuine progress.