



Work experience for SEMH learners: flexible models for inclusive practice

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A bit about me ...

- BSc (Hons) Biological Sciences 2006
- PGCE Secondary Science 2007
- Science teacher (2007 onwards)
- HoY (Sixth Form) – 9 years (including 2-year secondment to Head of Sixth form) 2010-2019
- Moved to an 'inadequate' school in 2019 as Curriculum Lead (Science) – 5 years
- Careers Lead (2020 onwards)
- Level 6 qualification (2024)
- Reinstated and ran work experience for the school after Covid
- Joined Hill View School as founding SLT member in 2024, first Assistant Headteacher post
- Lead on Curriculum from Y1-Y11 and Careers Lead, school Level 6 Careers Advisor



Hill View School:

- Opened September 2024 – brand new building, team and cohort
- Y1-Y9, moving up to Y11 in 2026-27
- SEMH specialism, though many with ADHD, Autism, EBSA and other needs including speech and language difficulties
- High FSM numbers and CLA including in care homes, most with negative prior experiences of mainstream school, including PEx/suspensions
- Rising roll (currently 60 learners)
- Learners joining across all ages and phases, where there are 'gaps'
- New classes:
 - Lower Secondary - Sept 2025
 - Middle primary - Easter 2026
 - 2 additional classes in Sept 2026 (likely middle school)
 - Up to 2 classes - Jan 2027



Workshop Overview



We will explore:

- Why traditional models don't work for SEMH learners
- What a flexible model looks like in practice
- Real examples from our school
- Practical strategies you can take away

Outcome:

Ideas on how to design inclusive, meaningful work experience pathways for learners with SEMH



The Challenge

SEMH learners often face:

- Anxiety around new environments
- Low confidence/self-belief
- Limited prior exposure to workplaces
- Difficulty sustaining longer placements

In our context:

- Brand new SEND school
- No established employer relationships
- Students had zero prior work experience



The Challenge



Amid rising national NEET figures, we have identified the prevalence of Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) conditions among young people as a major consideration when addressing the reduction of NEET.

In a preview of our latest research, we have found there are nearly five times as many NEET young people with an SEMH condition than those without an SEMH condition or education, health and care plan.

In areas where we deliver NEET support services, **38.1%** of young people aged 16 and 17 with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and an SEMH condition had spent time NEET during their first or second year after leaving school. This compares to **20.1%** of all young people with an EHCP, and **7.9%** of young people without an EHCP.

[Addressing needs of young people with SEMH conditions is vital in driving down NEET figures - Career Connect \(7th March 2025\)](#)

System Challenges



Employers unsure or hesitant about SEND

Market already saturated with traditional placements, particularly towards the end of the summer term

School staff (mostly primary-trained) unfamiliar with careers education and next steps

Preconceived ideas

- SEND
- SEMH
- Specialist education (particularly being a new school)

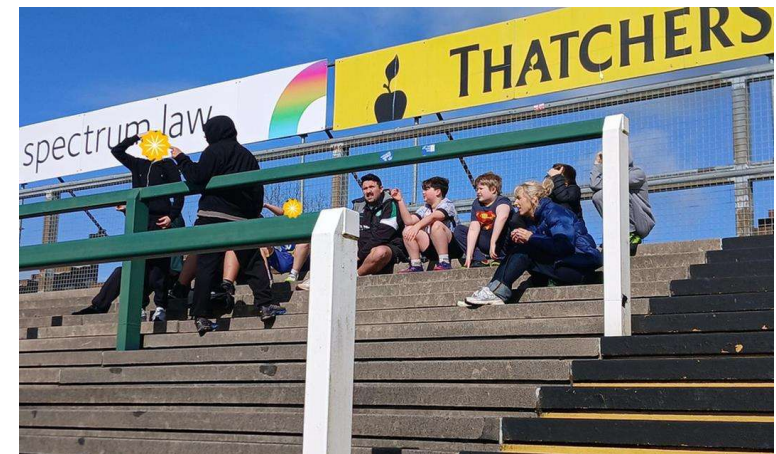
Our Approach

Core principle: FLEXIBILITY + PERSONALISATION

We built a model around:

- Starting small
- Gradual exposure
- Relationship-building
- Adaptable pacing

Aim: Confidence first, placement second



Working Strategically

We didn't work alone:

Somerset Careers Hub

- Employer contacts
- Strategic guidance
- Structured work experience placements

Somerset SEND Work Experience Pilot (18 schools)

- Funding
- Resource development

Ductu partnerships

- National employer access
- Meaningful workplace encounters

Local businesses

- Building trust from scratch
- Inviting them in to find out about us for themselves



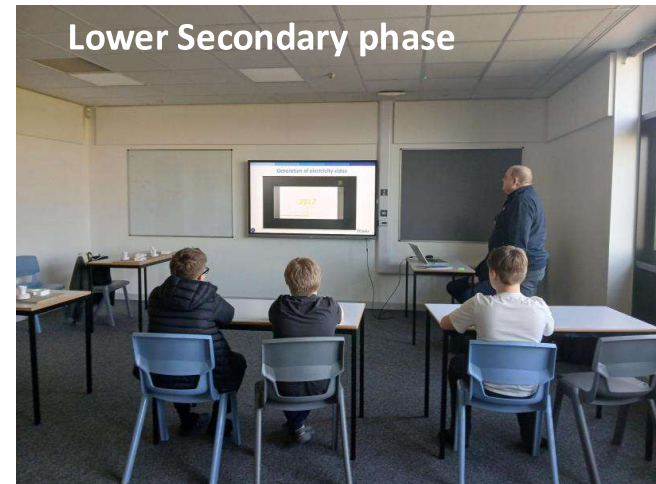
Phase 1: Workplace Exposure

Short, structured workplace experiences (Year 7–8 and up)
Visits, tours, workshops
Low pressure, high support
Repeated over time

Impact:

- Normalises the idea of work
- Reduces fear
- Builds curiosity

Key point: This is our foundation layer



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Phase 2: Stepped Placements



Case Study: Year 10 student

1. Phone conversation between staff member from Hill View School and Headteacher of local Primary School
2. Initial visit to workplace by learner with trusted adult (staff member), meeting the Headteacher, class teacher and proposed class
3. Review of visit by learner and trusted adult, liaison with Headteacher – agreement in principle
4. 1.5 hour supported session (staff onsite)
5. Review of first placement by learner, trusted adult, parent, class teacher and Headteacher – agreement to continue
6. Independent placement

Why 1.5 hours works:

- Not overwhelming
- Achievable success
- Builds stamina gradually

Next steps: Half days → full days → extended placement



Impact Story



Student outcome:

Proud, engaged, motivated

Successfully accessing placement

Increasing hours slowly across weeks (working up to full days in September)

Parent impact:

Previously sceptical → now fully supportive

Can see realistic next steps

This is more than work experience: It changes family perceptions

Hi [REDACTED]

I just wanted to send you a quick email to let you know that I took [REDACTED] to his first official afternoon at Reckleford School for work experience today. It was an absolute privilege to have this opportunity. [REDACTED] was amazing throughout this placement and I was so proud to be able to witness firsthand what a success this was for him.

When we got to Reckleford School, I was given a quiet space to work whilst [REDACTED] confidently went off to his assigned class with the headteacher. He was not nervous at all and didn't need me at any point throughout the time he was there. Towards the end of his time, I was able to watch him in the playground from my quiet space and the interactions that he was having with the children were fantastic. He was kind, caring and thoughtful and the children responded so well to him. [REDACTED] was then brought back to me at the end of his placement, and the teacher was gushing about how wonderful he was, saying that they would have him back anytime. As I explained to [REDACTED] on the journey back, they didn't have to say that at all; sharing this positive feedback immediately after his very first placement just shows us what a positive impression he has made already with them - no mean feat!

[REDACTED] was rightly also very proud of himself, sharing how he was feeling as we came back to Hill View. I hope that he tells you all about it when he gets home shortly.

Many thanks,

Philippa



Be the best you.
Build the best us.



Philippa Huggins
Assistant Headteacher
Hill View School

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- Martock, Ash, Somerset



Phase 2: Structured Placements (Careers Hub)

Unlock your Digital Future at Hinkley Point C!

A High-Impact, One Week Work Experience Adventure

You'll meet HPC project teams, discover how digital tools power a next-generation nuclear power station and build skills that employers actively look for.

Hosted at Sedgemoor Campus: 22nd to 26th June 2026



Your week will include:

- Meeting with digital experts across the project to find out how digital systems keep a mega-project running and the digital skills that will help you excel at HPC and beyond.
- An exclusive visit to Hinkley Point C where you will experience the scale of the UK's newest power station including a guided site tour and deep dive inside the HPC Visitor Centre.
- Access to the Young HPC programme and the opportunity to boost your CV with Digital Badges by completing interactive employability challenges and skills sessions.
- Explore Career Pathways at your local college and discover the routes that can take you straight into HPC careers.



Spaces are limited!

For more details, contact:
jenny.salmon@somerset.gov.uk
 The Work Experience Database Veryan number is 28551.



AgriTech Week: Where Farming Meets Technology



Take part in an exciting Digital Work Experience Week exploring how technology is transforming agriculture.

Hosted at The Bath & West Showground: 13th to 17th July 2026



to watch highlights from the Somerset Digital Futures work experience weeks 2025!

- Explore how **innovation, data, and digital technology** are shaping the future of farming.
- Meet **leading employers** and gain insight into the digital skills needed for **modern agriculture**.
- Get **hands-on** with the latest **digital tools and technologies**.
- Discover **career pathways and courses** to kickstart your journey into modern agriculture.

Spaces are limited!

The Work Experience Database Veryan number is **28150**. For more details, contact:
jenny.salmon@somerset.gov.uk



Phase 3: Post-16 progression planning



Employer visits to school

Workplace experiences

Work experience (short sessions)

Increased independence in work experience



Supported Internship

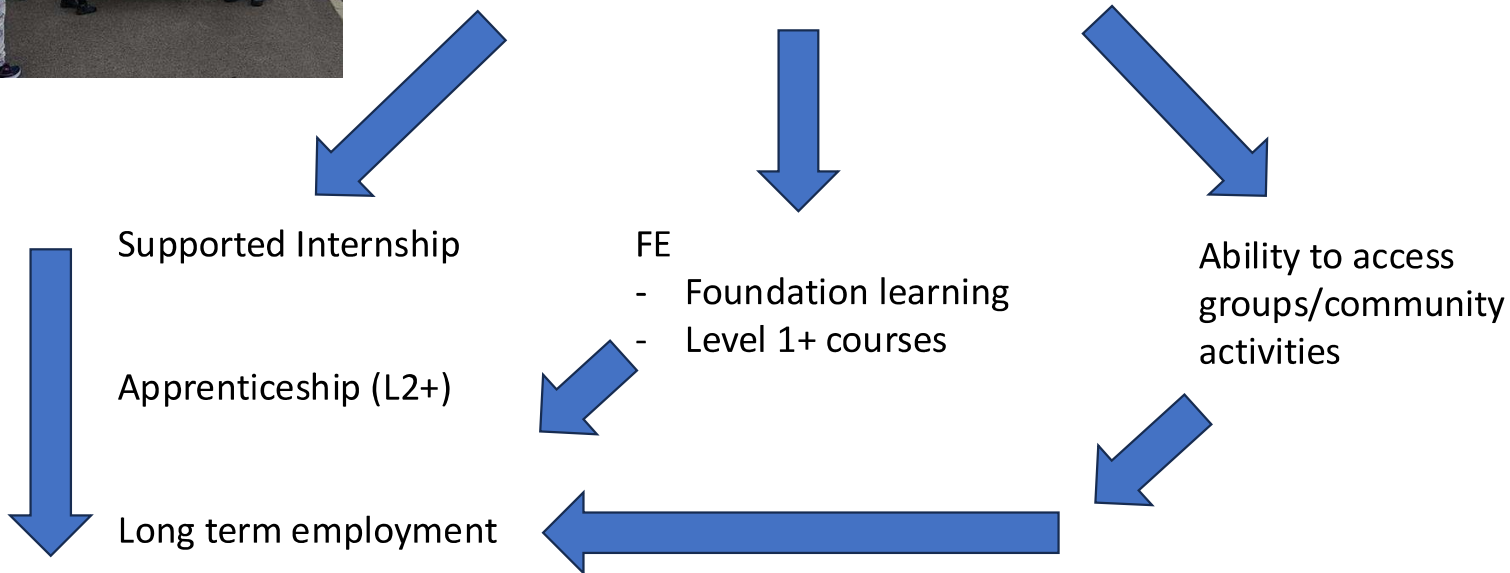
Apprenticeship (L2+)

Long term employment

FE

- Foundation learning
- Level 1+ courses

Ability to access groups/community activities



Gradual Release Model for Work Experience



We are working to fade support over time:

- Staff present onsite
- Staff nearby/remote
- Independent placement

Also includes:

- Parent reassurance
- Clear routines
- Predictability



Employer Engagement



Key strategies:

Start with experiences, not placements

Be transparent about needs + support

Share success stories early

Use “low-risk” entry points

Example: EmTech → initial experience → now open to placement



Common Barriers



“No” due to SEND assumptions (?)
Fear of risk/liability
Lack of understanding of alternative models
Competition with mainstream schools

Reality: We are asking for something different, it will take time for employers to get on board

We are fortunate to be part of a forward-thinking careers hub who are working on engaging with employers to re-imagine work experience (not just with SEND) and to train employers on how best to work with those with SEND.

Somerset also has had a huge increase in the number of Supported Internships available over the past few years – working with those employers on the route into supported internships will further support our delivery of work experience.

Somerset
CAREERS HUB

THE CAREERS &
ENTERPRISE
COMPANY

Practical Solutions

Staff CPD

- Build understanding of purpose
- You never know what links your staff have!

Employer education

- Reframing SEND strengths
- Flexible offers
- Micro-placements
- Split weeks
- Extended timelines

Take every opportunity

- Build momentum early
- Relationships over volume



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What is working so far

- ✓ Early exposure (Year 7+)
- ✓ Small steps (1–2 hours)
- ✓ Consistency and repetition
- ✓ Strong adult support initially
- ✓ Gradual independence



Linking to Work Experience Guarantee

Our model aligns by:

- Expanding access
- Personalising experiences
- Offering meaningful encounters before placements
- Supporting the most vulnerable learners

This IS modern work experience

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Key Takeaways

One size does not fit all

Start early, start small

Confidence is the outcome—not just placement

Employers need guidance as much as students

Work closely with your Career Hub – Somerset Careers Hub is forward thinking and supportive

Flexible models create real inclusion



Reflection

What barriers exist in your setting?

What could you adapt tomorrow?

Who could you partner with?

What opportunities are available through your Careers Hub?

Final Thoughts



If we wait until learners are 'ready', we risk them never starting.

Flexible models create readiness.



“

Our research shows that without timely careers interventions and support to overcome barriers, young people with SEMH needs are at increased risk of becoming NEET, which can have long-term consequences for their career prospects. When the government announced its new inquiry into rising youth inactivity, it was also widely reported that the number of young people claiming Universal Credit (UC) Health and Employment Support Allowance has risen by more than 50% over the past five years, with 80% currently citing mental health reasons or a neurodevelopmental condition.

[Addressing needs of young people with SEMH conditions is vital in driving down NEET figures - Career Connect](#)



A future TA in the making...please can it be shared with [redacted] s Mum that she is brilliant with the Knoll learners, a genuine joy to have around

