



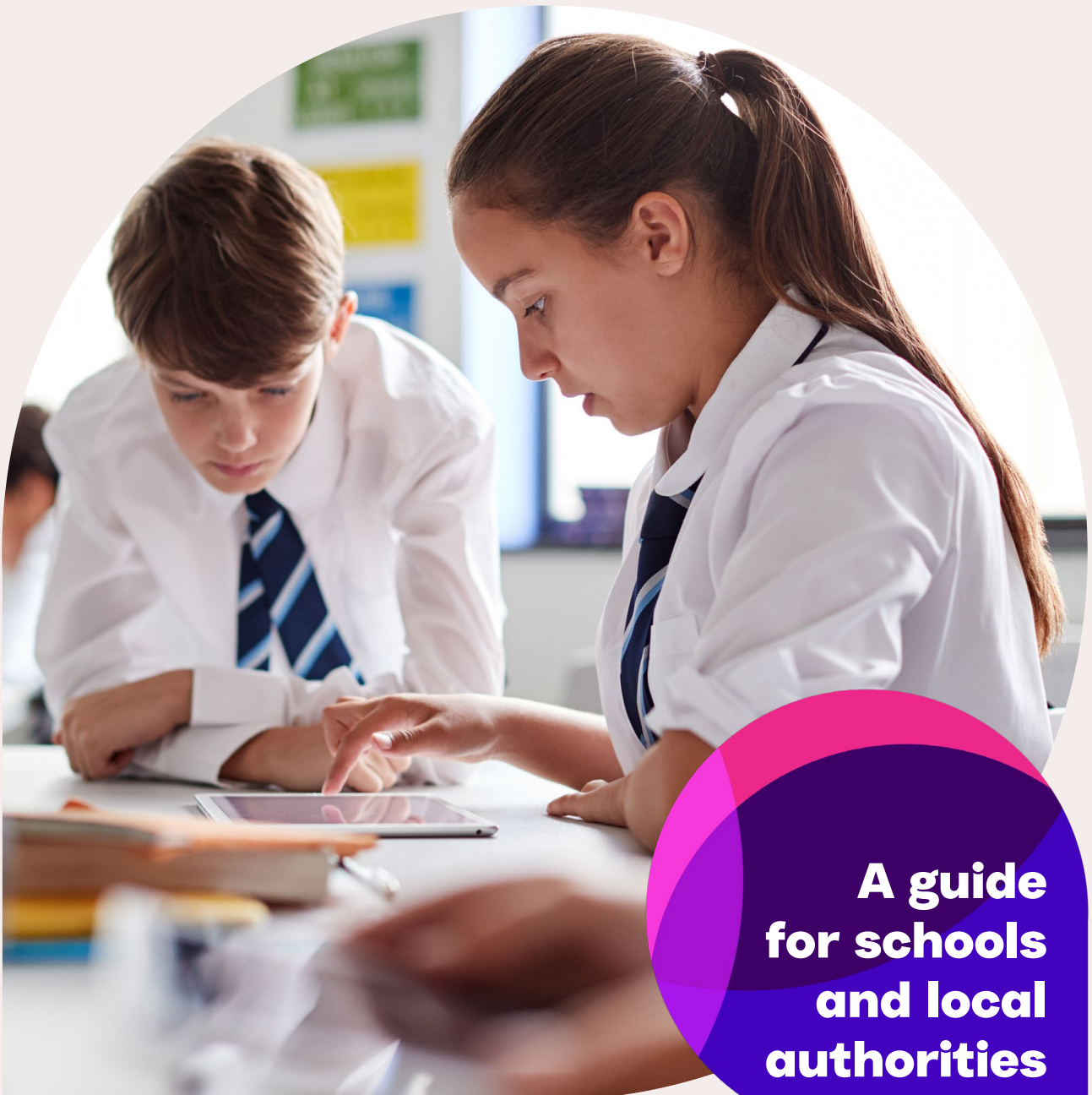
National
Autistic
Society

Cullum
Centres

National Autistic Society

Cullum Centres

Supporting autistic students within mainstream schools



**A guide
for schools
and local
authorities**

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Background and the aim of this guide

The **National Autistic Society** aims to transform lives and change attitudes to help create a society that works for autistic people. The **Cullum Family Trust** is dedicated to improving the lives of autistic people and their families, and to supporting autism education. The partnership between The Cullum Family Trust and the National Autistic Society started in 2012 to provide specialised education and support for autistic students across the UK.

The National Autistic Society is working in partnership with local authorities, schools and The Cullum Family Trust to develop Cullum Centres – specialist resource bases to support autistic pupils within mainstream schools. The first Cullum Centre opened in 2015, and there are currently six centres in five mainstream secondary schools. We aim to roll out the model and its benefits in more schools, including primary and sixth form/further education settings.

This is a guide for schools and local authorities who would consider setting up or supporting a Cullum Centre. It gives an overview of the centres and their ethos, the pupils they aim to support, and how they benefit autistic students and the wider school community. It also provides information about the requirements for establishing a Cullum Centre, and the funding and support schools will receive throughout the development process and through the first years of operation.

Introduction to Cullum Centres: supporting autistic pupils within mainstream schools

A National Autistic Society (NAS) Cullum Centre is a specialist resource provision, built on but fully integrated into a mainstream school. Cullum Centres are dedicated to helping autistic students thrive in a mainstream school environment and build the confidence and skills they need to succeed.

Each student receives specialist and individual support to help them become a full member of their school community – learning, socialising and taking responsibility alongside the other students. Cullum Centre pupils will spend the majority of their lesson time in the main body of the school, if they are able to. Students are valued and included, with high expectations of achievement. This the ethos across all Cullum Centre schools.

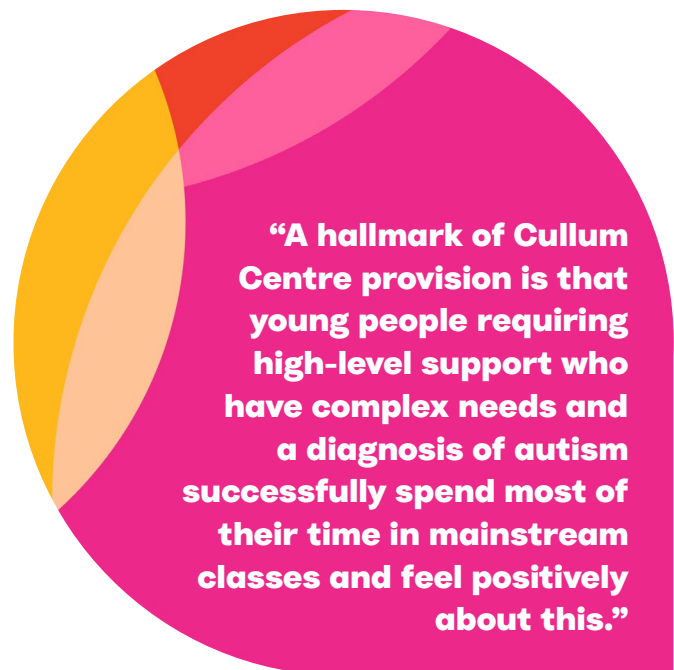
Programme overview

Schools taking part in the programme enter into a full partnership with the National Autistic Society and receive a range of support. This includes:

- Pre-opening support
- Intensive support for the centre's first five years
- Being part of a professional community
- £1.1 million capital/building investment fund

Programme outcomes

- Targeted provision for autistic students who aren't suited to either a special school or a standalone mainstream setting (see 'Cullum Centre pupil profile', below).
- A tried and tested approach for high-quality autism provision; protects against changing local and regional agendas by maintaining focus on autistic young people's needs.



Rapid Review of Cullum Centres, 2020



Cullum Centre pupil profile

Cullum Centre students are autistic young people who require specialist support to succeed in mainstream schools but have the cognitive ability to achieve in line with their non-SEND peers. They are likely to achieve the expected National Curriculum standard in KS1 and KS2 SATS at primary level, and be able to achieve at least five GCSEs (4 to 9) or equivalent.

The centres are designed to cater for students with a diagnosis of autism, as identified on their education, health and care plan (EHCP). These pupils would not be able to achieve their potential in a mainstream setting without the support that a Cullum Centre provides, but they are not suited to special school placements.

Cullum students should be able to manage a mainstream environment with specialist support from the centre staff. There is an expectation that students will be able to attend 80% of their lessons by Key Stage 4.

Cullum Centres typically provide for four students per year group with referrals usually for students at key transition points for school. The school will take referrals and organise admission assessments at any point in an academic year.



Year 10 boy in Cullum Centre

Cullum Centre design

Cullum Centre buildings have generous spaces and include a light, airy, uncluttered welcome area, with seating and social gathering space. Each centre has a small number of bespoke classrooms, a kitchen area for food tech lessons and general use, and rooms with computers, individual workstations, exercise equipment or materials for sensory needs. Some of the centres have their own allocated outdoor space.

No two centres are exactly the same, and we are committed to working with our partner schools to ensure that their centre suits their surroundings and available spaces. However, there are fundamental elements that need to be considered. These are set out in the 'Key considerations for design', which supports schools in planning and equipping Cullum Centres (see [Appendix 2](#)).

Student life in a Cullum Centre

Cullum Centres are embedded in mainstream schools and are dedicated to fully including students in every aspect of the school's life. Students use the centre for specialist autism support – for example, to develop their social or learning skills or to unwind during breaks – but with the right support will be able to spend most of their time in mainstream classes and activities every day.

Students who use a Cullum Centre follow a mainstream timetable like other students in the school. They study the full academic curriculum, with some lessons replaced by sessions in the centre.

Within the centre, students build their understanding of how autism affects them. They learn strategies to help them overcome any barriers their autism creates in the classroom and beyond, and explore and strengthen their social skills and independence.



“They [the centre staff] can spot things early and they can talk to her about stuff before she gets home. So generally, she’s processed quite a lot of it by the time she arrives.”


Mother of a year 7 autistic girl in Cullum Centre

Interventions for Cullum Centre students

Cullum Centre pupils benefit from a range of interventions. These can support their development as individuals as well as their studies and inclusion in mainstream school life. Interventions are adapted to meet the needs of the individual pupil.

They include:

- Additional support in English and Maths
- Study support for specific subjects
- Exam technique
- Study skills
- Managing transitions
- Life skills and independence
- Mentoring/key worker support
- Therapeutic interventions
- Sensory/emotional regulation programme
- Forest School
- Support from an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA)
- Speech and language groups, focusing on:
 - Vocabulary
 - Active listening
 - Memory Magic
 - Circle of Friends
 - Lego therapy

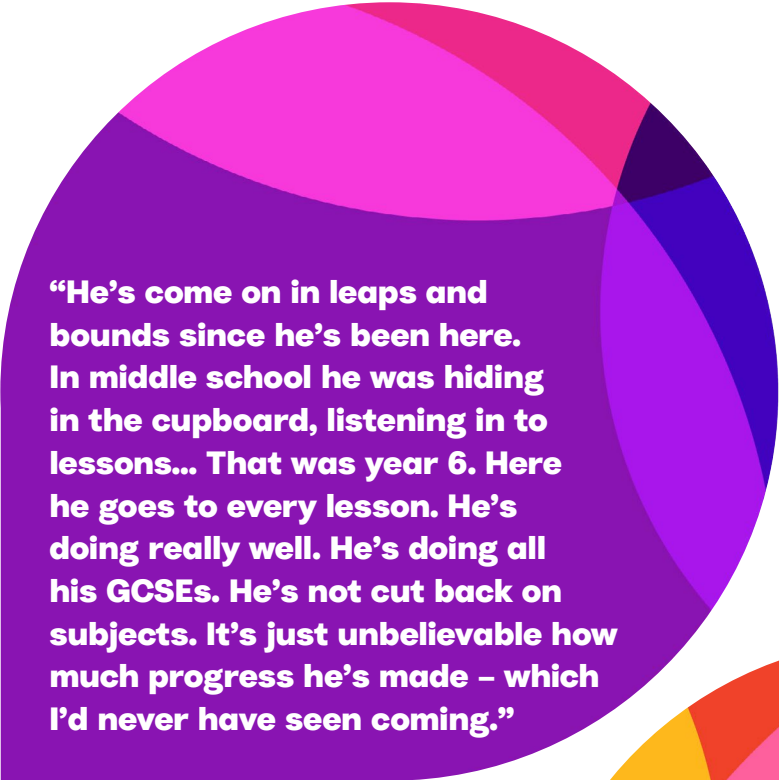


“The general impact of caring for an autistic student was striking, but the decrease in these challenges for parents of Cullum Centre pupils was particularly striking.”

Cullum Centre Evaluation, 2023


Key benefits for students and schools

- Facilitates inclusion
- High levels of achievement
- Students spend most of their time in mainstream classes and feel positively about it
- Inclusive practice is cascaded to improve standards and achievement throughout the whole school
- Positive feedback from families
- Students benefit from peer support and the opportunity to practice social skills in a safe environment
- Highly tailored support
- Students are encouraged to develop specialist skills and special interests
- Sharing of knowledge across the network of Cullum Centres



“He’s come on in leaps and bounds since he’s been here. In middle school he was hiding in the cupboard, listening in to lessons... That was year 6. Here he goes to every lesson. He’s doing really well. He’s doing all his GCSEs. He’s not cut back on subjects. It’s just unbelievable how much progress he’s made – which I’d never have seen coming.”

Mother of a year 10 boy
in Cullum Centre



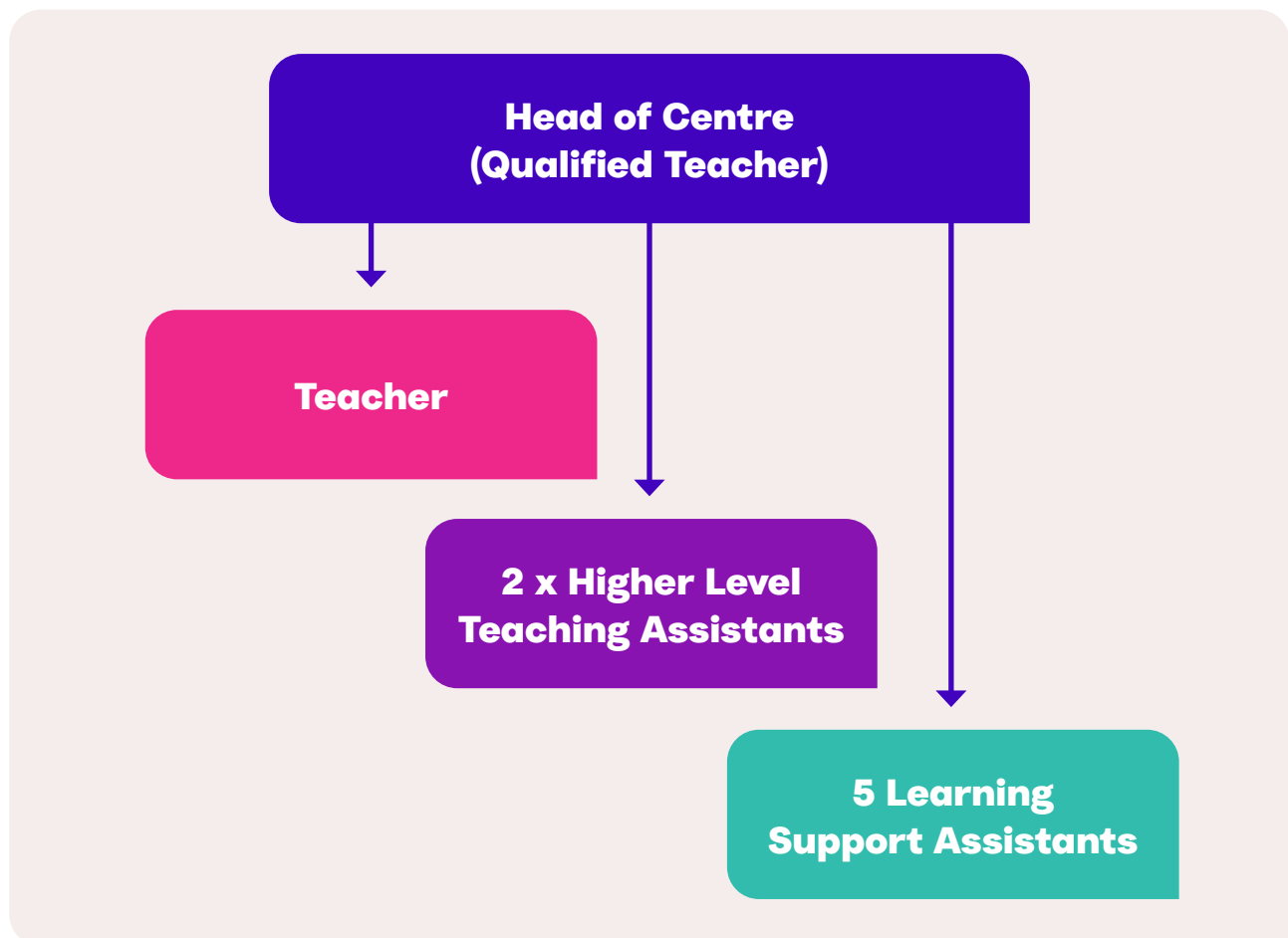
“There’s been a huge benefit to the wider school autistic community; they have benefitted from the increase in autism knowledge and awareness that’s come about because of the centre. There’s an awful lot of practice that I introduced in the centre when I came eight years ago that now happens in the whole school.”

Head of Cullum Centre

Staffing the Cullum Centre

On average, there are two students to each member of centre staff. All staff working in Cullum Centres will be trained to work with autistic young people, and receive further support and training to build and update their skills. The Cullum Centre is led by a qualified teacher. Staff in the centre are always there to offer support and understanding to students, and to provide a calm and safe place where they can take a break.

Organisational structure



Requirements for Cullum Centre schools

To be considered for developing and running a Cullum Centre, schools need to:

- Have achieved a rating of 'Good' or 'Outstanding' in the most recent Ofsted inspection.
- Demonstrate that pupils have made at least average progress at the end of key stage public examinations, for at least two years.
- Be able to provide evidence of a strong commitment to supporting autistic pupils' education, and have a clear strategic plan showing how a Cullum Centre would enhance existing inclusive provision.

Responsibilities and commitments of partners

The development of a Cullum Centre relies on a three-way partnership between the National Autistic Society, the local authority and the school. Each partner has their own responsibilities and commitments, as outlined below.

The National Autistic Society

The NAS will provide advice and act on behalf of the Cullum Family Trust in providing capital build funding throughout the construction of the Cullum Centre. It will support the school in recruiting the Head of Centre and providing training for all centre staff to ensure they have the specialist skills required to support autistic students effectively. The NAS will initially provide a training needs analysis that can help the school identify gaps in training, and will support the school in finding an appropriate training provider.

The NAS will provide an education consultant who will assist each centre to prepare for its Autism Accreditation assessment, alongside support from an autism accreditation consultant. This will include observations of practice, both in the Cullum Centre and in mainstream lessons where Cullum Centre students are being taught, identification of areas for strengthening and development, and liaison with the Head of Centre and support staff.

The NAS, in collaboration with the local authority, will monitor the quality of the Cullum Centre annually and provide a report to the school.

The NAS will chair regular meetings with Heads of Centres to support the sharing of good practice and provide an opportunity to problem solve.

The school

The school will provide any necessary data or documents to the NAS throughout the process, as required, from initial agreement through to and beyond the centre build and opening.

The school has the responsibility for owning and running the centre in line with the school's policies and procedures. Once the Cullum Centre is open, the school will be responsible for the ongoing maintenance of the building and fixtures and furnishings.

School governors or trustees are responsible for the monitoring and management of the centre, and the centre should be included within all statutory inspections. Any data that accumulates through monitoring or statutory inspections should be made available to the NAS, if required.

As part of the programme, schools will be expected to undertake sufficient autism training and accreditation. Schools will be responsible for the fees associated with these. The whole school is expected to complete the NAS Autism Accreditation programme. The Cullum Centre will work towards the Autism Specialist Award, with support from an autism accreditation consultant. Once the centre has obtained accredited status, the mainstream school will be required to work towards the Inclusion Award, which is based on the Autism Education Trust (AET) School Standards.

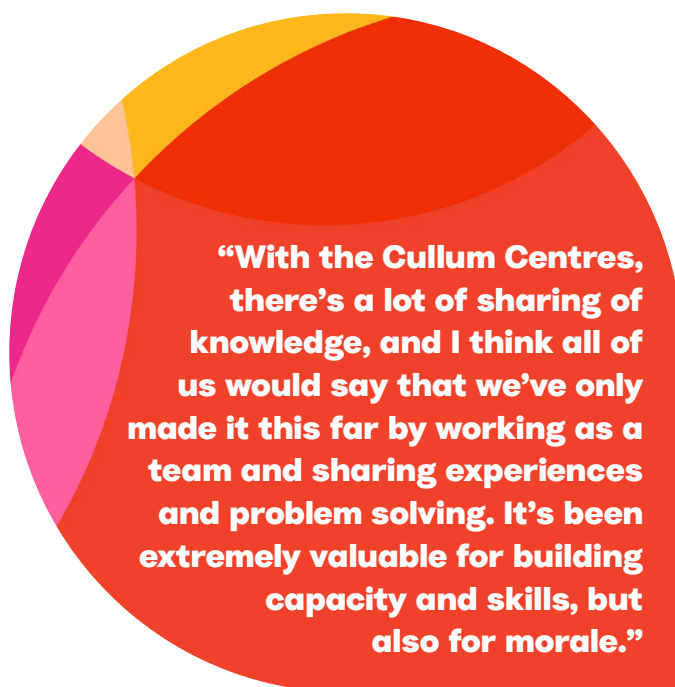
The local authority

The local authority will agree to provide funding for Cullum Centre pupils, for up to four places per year group.

In collaboration with the NAS, the local authority will monitor the quality of the centre annually and provide a finalised report to the school.

The local authority will provide any necessary data or documents to the NAS throughout the process, as required, from initial agreement through to and beyond the build and opening of the Cullum Centre.

The local authority will pay a contribution of £50,000 to the NAS for operating costs and for initiating the project.



Head of Cullum Centre

Financial breakdown

Detail	LA	School	NAS/CFT*
Contribution to NAS towards operating costs for initiating the project	£50,000	£0	£0
Build programme contribution pot available	£0	£0	£975,000
FF&E and ICT** contribution	£0	£0	£75,000
Build programme professional fees incurred	£0	£0	£50,000
Total	£50,000	£0	£1,100,000

* CFT - Cullum Family Trust

** FF&E - fixtures, fittings and equipment; ICT - information and communications technology

The NAS Cullum Centre Team



Christine Flintoft-Smith - Head of Autism Accreditation and funded projects

Christine has worked for the National Autistic Society for 18 years, supporting and leading a variety of services and projects in areas including adult social care services, employment, further education student support, inclusion, training and accreditation.



Nikki Kennedy - Specialist Resource Base Lead

Nikki previously worked in colleges supporting autistic students before joining the National Autistic Society in 2015. She has spent eight years working for the Autism Accreditation Team, supporting schools and services to develop their autism practice in line with NAS quality standards.



Jade Ponnudurai - Specialist Resource Base Officer

Before joining the National Autistic Society in 2022, Jade worked in a range of roles such as learning support manager and safeguarding lead in further education colleges, teaching in both mainstream and specialist provision, delivering training, public speaking, and co-authoring several articles and a book. Jade is also autistic.

National Autistic Society values

We learn from real experience. We've spent over 60 years working together with autistic people. No one has more practical knowledge of autism. But we move with the times, and we understand that there's always more to learn.

We tell it like it is. We share what we have learned about autism, so that more people can make informed decisions and enable autistic people to lead the best lives possible.

We inspire. We celebrate progress, open up new possibilities, spur people into action and motivate change.

We are courageous. We won't accept ignorance or inequality, and we'll never stop pushing for more understanding, greater support and a better world for autistic people.

The Cullum Centre programme to date

There are currently six Cullum Centres; these are all linked with secondary provisions in the south of the UK.



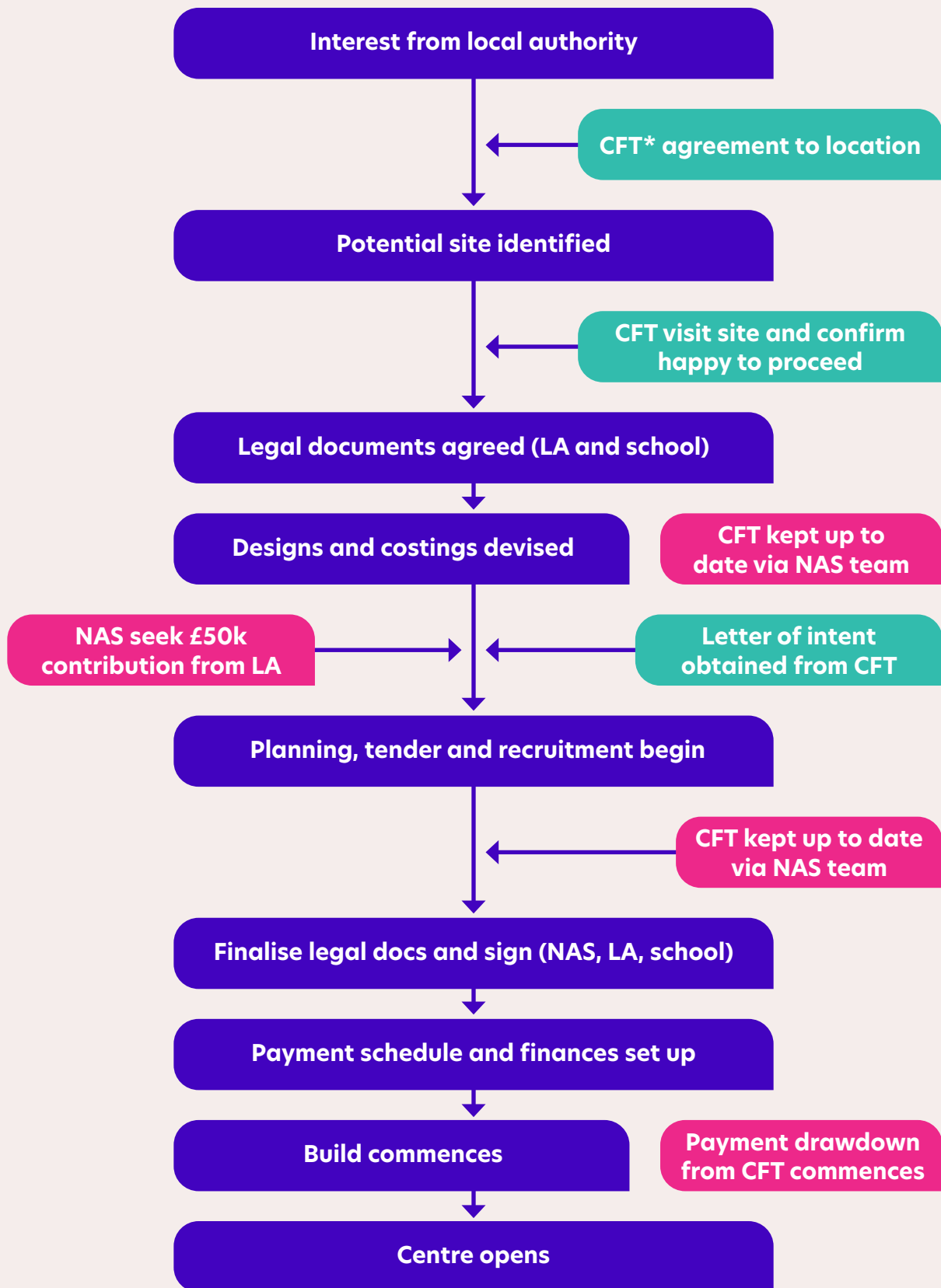
- ① Salesians - Surrey
- ② Rodborough - Surrey
- ③ Hinchley Wood - Surrey
- ④ Hove Park, Valley Campus - Hove
- ⑤ Hove Park, Nevill Campus - Hove
- ⑥ Canterbury Academy - Kent

Canterbury Academy is building a primary Cullum Centre with a projected opening of May 2024. The aim is to expand Cullum Centres across all phases of education.



Canterbury Academy

Appendix 1: Cullum Centre stages of approval



*CFT - Cullum Family Trust

Appendix 2: Key considerations for design

The table below suggests areas to consider in the design of a Cullum Centre. They have been compiled from good practice examples and learning from existing centres.

Consideration	Essential/ Desirable	Secondary setting	Primary setting	Reasoning
Flexible use training rooms 3 @ 25-32m ² is ideal	Essential	Yes	Yes	Different sized rooms allow greater flexibility of use
Flexible use 'intervention rooms'	Essential	2 or 3 at 8m ² to 20m ² is ideal	Yes	Use therapy room flexibly, can be used for teaching and quiet area
Staff office	Essential	Yes - space for 3 staff	Yes	Locating this next to or near the centre entrance will ensure staff are aware of who is accessing the environment and can greet the young people
Kitchen/diner area	Essential	Yes - kitchen to support life skills requirements	Focus on access to sinks /space for internal creative sessions, art, etc.	
Curved walls	Desirable	Yes	Yes	Aids with transition and movement around the centre
Neutral colour palette	Essential	Yes	Yes	Prevents sensory overload and distraction

Consideration	Essential/ Desirable	Secondary setting	Primary setting	Reasoning
Colour-coded areas	Desirable	Yes	Yes	Feature wall colours help to denote a room for a specific use, e.g. library, kitchen, sports hall
Disability Discrimination Act compliant toilets	Essential	3 toilets plus a shower room with toilet is ideal	KS1 – toilets close to training rooms, age-appropriate	Toilets situated in their own area and not directly off the main corridor are best
Changing room		As part of the toilet configuration	Not necessary	Some students have found it useful to come to the base to change for activities taking place in the main body of the school
Dedicated communal area for students	Essential	Yes	Yes	
Movable walls in communal area	Desirable	Yes	Yes	This will make the use of the space more flexible and enable areas to be more private
Dedicated outdoor space	Essential	Yes	Yes	Access to the outdoor space from each room if possible
Lockers for pupils	Desirable	Yes		Pupils like to have a space to keep their belongings in a secure place

Consideration	Essential/ Desirable	Secondary setting	Primary setting	Reasoning
Natural light	Essential	Yes	Yes	Having natural light helps pupils to regulate and minimises the need for the use of electric light in a room
Temperature variable per room	Desirable			Being able to adapt the temperature in each room or at least via the centre will ensure it can meet specific needs
Radiators				Cover radiators or don't have any
Acoustics	Essential	Yes	Yes	The inclusion of sound dampeners will reduce sensory stimulation
Built-in storage	Desirable			Will reduce clutter and distractions
Additional entrance separate to main school entrance	Essential	Yes	Yes	Supports pupils who may need to regulate before entering wider school site
Average internal size		320m ² - 400m ²	320m ² - 400m ²	

Appendix 3: Floor plans of Hove Park School, Nevill Campus



Floor plans for each centre are available on request; contact: cullum.centres@nas.org.uk



Hove Park School, Nevill Campus

For more information or to get in contact, email:
cullum.centres@nas.org.uk



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