



National Association  
of Special Schools

# Chief Executive Officer

Appointment brief • May 2026

Jenny Hills • Director, Harris Hill Ltd

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# About us

The National Association of Special Schools (NASS) is the membership association for special schools in England and Wales. We bring together independent special schools, Non-Maintained Special Schools (NMSS), special academies, maintained special schools and multi-academy trusts with specialist provision. We are a member-led organisation, with a strong reputation for being accessible, responsive and personal in our relationships with schools.

NASS exists to inform, support and represent our members, helping specialist schools demonstrate and improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND, and to secure the place of specialist provision within the wider education system. We combine national influence with practical support that members value as timely, human and trustworthy.

We are a trusted, evidence-based voice for special schools, working closely with members, other SEND organisations, and central and local government to provide insight, information and influence.

Following the retirement of our long-standing CEO, Claire Dorer OBE, we are seeking an exceptional Chief Executive to lead the organisation into its next phase of development, influence the national SEND agenda, and ensure our members receive high-quality, impactful support.

## **What we do**

NASS delivers a blend of practical services, professional development and national advocacy. Our offer includes regular briefings and policy updates, termly special interest groups, two annual conferences, webinars and training, and partnership benefits that help schools share innovation, reduce duplication and improve practice. Members also value direct access to named staff, quick responses and the sense that NASS is approachable and easy to work with.

We are recognised by the Department for Education and Ofsted as a key sector body, and respond to consultations, sit on national reference groups and forums, and give oral evidence to parliamentary inquiries when needed. As the latest white paper signals major change to SEND provision, this influencing role remains central to what we do.

In 2025 we published our annual Impact Report highlighting initiatives including a leadership programme with The Glass House Leadership Lab, an AI pilot supporting member schools, expanded training, and a strengthened annual programme of events and member briefings. These activities are designed to reduce workload, share innovation and build leadership capacity in special schools, while supporting members to navigate uncertainty and make better use of tools such as the CRM and community platform.



# Who we are

## Our values

- We put NASS members and their learners at the heart of all we do.
- We are proactive, outward-facing and collaborative, to continuously improve opportunities and standards for member schools and their learners.

## Our vision

- Our vision is that every child and young person with SEND receives the education and support they need to achieve their best possible outcomes.
- Children and young people with SEND are supported by a diverse range of specialised provision, in and from special schools, with the capacity and quality to meet their needs.

## Our mission

- We inform and support our members, enabling them to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- We represent our members, influencing policy and practice as the voice of special schools.
- We research and share approaches that deliver positive outcomes for children and young people with SEND.
- We create networks and communities of schools that enable the growing and sharing of effective practices for schools.



# Where we are

## Governance

NASS is a charity and company limited by guarantee, with a board of trustees providing governance and strategic oversight. The charity number is 1083632 and the company number is 3774801.

The organisation has a small, experienced team, bringing together longstanding sector knowledge with practical expertise in policy, operations, communications and member support. It is a highly collegiate, flexible remote team, where people work across roles and support one another closely rather than operating in silos.

## Our staff team:

Claire Dorer OBE – Chief Executive

Mari Davis – Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer

Jenny Hayward – Operations Officer

Susie Patterson – Business Development and Communications Officer

Helena Wragg – Administrative Officer

Jasper Williams – Policy and Research Intern

For many people, Claire is highly synonymous with NASS, so the next Chief Executive will need to continue the work already started to have multiple people visible externally and internally. The compact staff team and active trustee body support nimble advocacy and close member engagement, but capacity is concentrated. The next Chief Executive will need to further develop both external influence and internal resilience, while protecting the organisation's culture.

## Finances

NASS operates with modest turnover for a national membership body. Charity Commission reporting for the year ending 31st March 2025 records total income of £464,660 and total expenditure of £527,847. The board took the strategic decision to spend some reserves on growth and modernisation, leading to a planned deficit budget.

The organisation has a straightforward funding model, with income from membership, events and partner activity. It is not reliant on government funding, and the current climate is creating a degree of momentum in membership interest as SEND reforms continue to evolve.

There is scope to diversify income further, while remaining faithful to the core purpose of the organisation and the value members expect. The next Chief Executive will need to steward this model carefully, ensuring that any growth in partnerships or commercial activity strengthens rather than dilutes member trust.

# What's next

## Working with NASS

NASS is member-led, inclusive and highly collaborative. The refreshed vision and mission voted for by members in 2025 underline our commitment to championing high-quality specialist provision, sharing evidence and best practice, and representing member views in national policy forums. We position ourselves as a trusted, evidence-based voice, responding promptly to consultations, working with partner organisations, and giving members practical support that is relevant, timely and useful.

Membership currently stands at almost 500 schools and organisations. The offer includes publications, briefings, discounted partner services, networking opportunities, termly special interest groups, development programmes and events that help schools share innovation and build leadership capacity. As membership broadens, there is a particular opportunity to deepen engagement with academies and maintained special schools, while ensuring Non-Maintained Special Schools and Independent schools continue to feel central to the organisation's identity and offer.

## The opportunity

NASS now seeks a new Chief Executive to guide the organisation through a period of structural and policy uncertainty for SEND. This is a pivotal role for a leader who can balance outward-facing advocacy with inward-facing stewardship.

It is also a transition from a long-standing CEO with a high profile in the sector, so the successful candidate will need to replace not just a person, but a way of thinking, communicating and interpreting the sector. A key opportunity over the next two years is ensuring that the role of special schools is valued and reflected in government policy – our new CEO will take a lead role in lobbying for this and representing the sector at national policy level.

The right person will combine strategic vision with operational rigour. They will be expected to steward finances prudently, grow and diversify income, sustain and strengthen member services, and act as a credible public ambassador for special schools. They will need to be both a strong institutional leader and a trusted internal anchor for a small, remote team.

## The next Chief Executive will need to:

- Lead NASS confidently through a period of major SEND reform, helping members understand what is changing and what it means for special schools.
- Strengthen NASS's profile as the national voice of special schools, while ensuring the organisation remains member-led and grounded in practical support.
- Build and maintain high-level relationships with government, parliament, national organisations and sector partners.
- Support and develop an entirely remote team, encouraging collaboration, resilience and clear accountability.
- Oversee financial planning, budgeting, reporting and income diversification with discipline and clarity.
- Review organisational structure and ways of working where needed, making thoughtful strategic decisions in the interests of members.

# Our future

## Challenges and opportunities

Having led us since 2005, Claire Dorer is highly synonymous with NASS, so the transition will require careful relationship-building and a confident, visible start from the new Chief Executive. This is not simply a leadership handover; it is a brand transition, and the new Chief Executive will need to reassure members, staff and trustees that NASS remains steady, credible and member-led.

NASS must continue to demonstrate relevance to a broad and changing membership base, including schools that may not yet fully engage with the full offer. The organisation will need to retain the confidence of long-standing Non-Maintained Special Schools and Independent schools while also broadening its relevance to academies and maintained schools.

The SEND landscape is complex and politically active, so NASS will need to keep pace with consultation, policy and parliamentary activity while helping members navigate uncertainty. NASS enjoys a position of widely recognised expertise and influence in the SEND space, which will need to be maintained and built on. There is clear scope for NASS to deepen its national influencing work, ensuring the expertise and value of special schools are recognised more strongly across policy and practice.

There is an opportunity to build on the progress already made in strengthening NASS's communications and member engagement, including the move to Microsoft-based systems and the breadth of expertise across the team beyond Claire. In the short to medium term, the priority is to provide operational stability and continuity, as reflected in the Risk Register, while continuing to develop the use of CRM and digital platforms where this adds value.

There is scope to grow membership, deepen partnerships and develop additional income streams without losing the integrity of the NASS brand.

## What success will look like

### 1 year from appointment

- The new Chief Executive is established clearly as the public face of NASS and has developed credibility with members, trustees, partners and policy stakeholders.
- Membership is stable, with early growth in new schools and organisations joining NASS (a crucial moment will be February 2027, with two thirds of membership renewals coming up).
- NASS has a clear and compelling response to SEND reform, with strong messaging for members and an active influencing strategy with government and parliament.
- A well-considered financial plan is in place, with early progress on diversification and income growth.
- The staff team remains cohesive and trusted, with the new Chief Executive having built confidence without unsettling the culture.

# Our future



## 5 years from appointment

- NASS is recognised as the leading representative body for special schools in the UK, with a strong and trusted national profile both within the SEND sector and externally.
- Membership has grown significantly, including greater representation from academies and local authority schools, supported by a nuanced offer for different audiences.
- The organisation has clear succession planning and a staff team with the capacity to deliver growth in priority areas.
- NASS continues to be a respected adviser to government, with a durable role in shaping SEND policy and protecting the place of special schools.
- New income streams are established and the organisation's reputation for reliable, relevant and evidence-based support remains intact.

# Job description

## **Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of National Association of Special Schools (NASS)**

**Location:** National – home-based (with regular travel across England and Wales, particularly London)

**Contract:** Full-time, permanent (subject to 6-months probation)

### **Role Purpose**

The Chief Executive will provide strategic leadership, vision, and operational management for NASS, ensuring the charity delivers on its mission, maintains financial sustainability, and remains a respected national voice for specialist education. The Chief Executive will seek to grow the organisation further as it works towards its goal of representing all special schools in England and Wales. The role involves working closely with the Board of Trustees, staff team, members, government bodies, and sector partners.

### **Key Responsibilities**

#### **1. Strategic Leadership and Vision**

- Provide clear, forward-looking leadership aligned with NASS's mission and long-term ambitions.
- Develop and deliver the organisational strategy in collaboration with the Board of Trustees.
- Monitor emerging national policy and sector developments, ensuring NASS remains an influential and credible voice in the SEND landscape.
- Foster a strong organisational culture centred on collaboration, integrity, and impact.

#### **2. Charity Governance and Compliance**

- Ensure NASS complies with all legal, regulatory, and statutory requirements, including those set by the Charity Commission.
- Support the Board of Trustees in fulfilling their governance responsibilities, providing high-quality reporting, advice, and insight.
- Develop and maintain effective organisational policies, risk management frameworks, and safeguarding standards.
- Ensure transparent and accountable decision-making processes.

#### **3. Operational and Organisational Management**

- Lead, motivate, develop, recruit and manage the staff team, setting clear objectives and championing a positive working environment.
- Ensure the effective delivery of all programmes, services, and member support activities.
- Oversee operational planning, performance management, and continuous quality improvement.
- Maintain strong internal systems for HR, finance, and operational administration.

#### **4. Financial Sustainability and Resource Management**

- Lead strategic financial planning and oversee the charity's financial health.
- Work with the Operations Officer and Treasurer to set and monitor budgets, ensuring responsible stewardship of resources.
- Identify and pursue diversified income opportunities, including grants, partnerships, and commissioned work.
- Ensure transparency, accountability, and value for money in all financial operations.

# Job description

## 5. External Relations, Advocacy, and Influence

- Act as the primary spokesperson and ambassador for NASS at national level.
- Build strong relationships with government departments, regulators, local authorities, partner organisations, and sector leaders.
- Represent member interests in policy discussions, consultations, and national forums.
- Ensure NASS's communications, public affairs, and media engagement effectively promote and strengthen the organisation's voice and reputation.

## 6. Member Engagement and Support

- Ensure NASS continues to deliver high-quality support, guidance, and professional services to its members.
- Understand and respond to the needs of special schools and specialist providers across the country.
- Strengthen membership networks, professional development opportunities, and sector-wide collaboration.
- Promote best practice and innovation within the SEND and specialist education sector.
- Grow membership amongst academies and local authority maintained special schools

## 7. General Responsibilities

- Demonstrate by actions commitment to the organisation's vision and mission and a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.
- Any other duties commensurate with role to support the organisation's business needs.
- To be responsible for their own and organisation's health and safety.
- Develop and undertake training and development to enhance their and the organisation's skills and knowledge.

This job description will be reviewed on annual basis by the CEO and trustees.



# Person specification

## Experience and knowledge

- Successful senior leadership experience within a charity, membership body, education or public sector organisation, with a clear track record of leading through change.
- Experience of working with or reporting to a board or trustees, and supporting effective governance and decision-making.
- Understanding of SEND, special education, membership organisations or similarly complex stakeholder environments.
- Experience of strategic and operational leadership, including organisational development and team leadership in resource-constrained settings.
- Proven ability to oversee budgets, financial planning and resource allocation responsibly.
- Evidence of income generation, partnership development or commercial thinking.
- Ability to analyse and interpret complex written and numerical information quickly and accurately, exercising sound judgement.
- **Desirable:** Direct SEND experience.
- **Desirable:** Experience of influencing policy, engaging with government and external stakeholders, and representing an organisation credibly at national level, including through public affairs, advocacy or sector engagement.

## Skills and abilities

- Excellent communication skills, with the ability to represent the organisation confidently and credibly with a wide range of audiences, including members, staff, MPs, peers, media and national partners.
- Strong strategic thinking, with the ability to absorb complex information, synthesise it and translate it into clear, practical direction.
- Strong political judgement, with the ability to navigate nuance, competing priorities and a sensitive external environment.
- A highly effective relationship-builder, able to build influence, access key stakeholders and develop partnerships that benefit members.
- Credibility and gravitas, combined with approachability and warmth; a visible leader who can build trust quickly with diverse audiences.
- A collaborative and coaching leadership style, with the ability to support, challenge and develop a small, remote team while maintaining a high-trust culture.
- Resourcefulness and innovation, with the ability to identify opportunities and make well-judged decisions, including where these are difficult or require change.
- Strong organisational and problem-solving skills, with the ability to manage multiple priorities effectively.
- Comfort working autonomously and remotely, with the resilience, emotional intelligence and judgement required to lead in a high-profile and sometimes uncertain environment.



# Terms of appointment

<b>Job title</b>	Chief Executive
<b>Reporting line</b>	The Chair of the Board
<b>Location</b>	National – home-based (with regular travel across England and Wales, particularly London)
<b>Contract</b>	Full-time, permanent (subject to 6-months probation)
<b>Salary</b>	£90,000 – £110,000 per annum
<b>Pension</b>	10% employer contribution
<b>Annual leave</b>	25 days plus bank holidays
<b>Start date</b>	November / December 2026



# How to apply

If you would like to apply for the CEO role at NASS, please send the following:

An up-to-date CV outlining your employment history, academic and professional qualifications, and contact details

A Supporting Statement (no more than 2 x A4 pages), which:

Demonstrates how you meet the criteria outlined in the Person Specification.

Explains your interest in becoming the CEO of NASS.

If possible, please combine the CV and supporting statement into one document (Word or PDF).

Please submit your completed application to [executive@harrishill.co.uk](mailto:executive@harrishill.co.uk) by **9am, Monday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2026**.

## Recruitment and appointment timelines:

<b>Applications close</b>	<b>Monday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2026</b>
<b>Shortlisting meeting</b>	<b>Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2026</b>
<b>First-stage interviews - remote</b>	<b>Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2026</b>
<b>Second-stage interviews – in-person, London</b>	<b>Monday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2026</b>
<b>Start date</b>	<b>November / December</b>
<b>Conference in Leamington Spa (new CEO introduces themselves to members)</b>	<b>11<sup>th</sup> / 12<sup>th</sup> November</b>

Please state in your application if you have any commitments during the interview period that may coincide with these dates, or if you require any special provisions should you be called forward for interview.

For any queries or to arrange a confidential conversation, please contact Jenny Hills at Harris Hill ([executive@harrishill.co.uk](mailto:executive@harrishill.co.uk)) with your availability.

# Advertising copy

## Chief Executive Officer (CEO) – National Association of Special Schools (NASS)

National – home-based, with regular travel across England and Wales, particularly London  
£90,000–£110,000 per annum  
Full-time, permanent.

### What does it take to lead the national voice for special schools at a time of real change?

#### About NASS

The National Association of Special Schools (NASS) is the membership association for special schools in England and Wales. We bring together independent special schools, non-maintained special schools, special academies, maintained special schools and multi-academy trusts with specialist provision.

We exist to inform, support and represent our members, helping specialist schools improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND and secure the place of specialist provision within the wider education system. NASS is known for being accessible, responsive and personal, combining national influence with practical support that members value as timely, human and trustworthy.

This is a pivotal moment for the organisation. In February this year, the Department for Education published a major white paper on SEND reform which will require NASS to both influence national policy on behalf of our members and children and young people, as well as support them to navigate the changes. Our new CEO will need to review our strategy while building on our strong platform and momentum to further deepen our influence and strengthen our internal capacity.

#### As our next Chief Executive, you will:

- **Strategy & Impact:** Lead NASS through a period of policy and structural change, ensuring the organisation remains clear on purpose, responsive to members and influential in the SEND landscape.
- **Governance & Finance:** Work closely with the Board of Trustees to provide strong governance, prudent financial stewardship, robust risk management and clear strategic oversight.
- **Operational Leadership:** Provide confident leadership to a small, remote team, strengthening collaboration, accountability, resilience and a positive, high-trust culture.
- **Income Generation:** Oversee budgeting, planning and reporting while developing thoughtful opportunities to diversify income through membership, partnerships, events and related activity.
- **Community & Partnerships:** Build and sustain trusted relationships with government, parliament, regulators, sector bodies and member schools, ensuring NASS remains relevant and well connected.
- **Member Services:** Protect and enhance the practical offer to members, from briefings and special interest groups to conferences, webinars, training and peer-to-peer learning.
- **Brand & Profile:** Act as a credible public ambassador for NASS, helping to modernise communications and broaden the organisation's voice beyond a founder-shaped model.
- **Future Growth:** Shape a distributed leadership profile and support a more varied, accessible and engaging approach to membership, advocacy and communications.

# Advertising copy

## Who you are

- A seasoned senior leader with experience in a charity, membership body, education or public sector setting, and a clear track record of leading through change.
- A strong strategic thinker, able to absorb complex information quickly and translate it into clear, practical direction.
- A confident communicator with the gravitas to represent NASS with members, staff, trustees, MPs, peers, media and national partners.
- A politically astute relationship-builder, comfortable navigating a complex and fast-moving external environment.
- Experienced in governance, with a sound understanding of working with boards or trustees and supporting effective decision-making.
- Numerate and commercially minded, with experience of budgets, financial planning, income generation or partnership development.
- Credible, approachable and resilient, with the emotional intelligence to lead well in a high-profile, remote and sometimes uncertain context.
- Direct SEND experience would be a significant advantage, alongside understanding of specialist education or similarly complex stakeholder environments.

## Why NASS?

- This is a chance to lead a respected, member-led organisation with a strong national reputation and a clear public purpose.
- You will help shape the future of specialist education at a time when SEND reform is high on the agenda.
- NASS has a loyal, experienced and collegiate remote staff team, supported by an active Board of Trustees.
- The organisation offers a genuinely influential platform, with strong connections across the sector and with government.

## Application

For full details of the role including how to apply, please download the full appointment brief. For an informal and confidential conversation about this position, please contact Jenny Hills at Harris Hill at [executive@harrishill.co.uk](mailto:executive@harrishill.co.uk) with times to speak and (optional but appreciated) a CV or professional profile which will be treated with the strictest confidence.

**Closing date for applications: 9am, Monday 8th June 2026**

*As leading charity recruitment specialists and a certified B Corp, Harris Hill is committed to high and ever-improving standards of equitable and inclusive recruitment. We actively welcome applications from all sections of the community regardless of age, disability, gender, race, religion, sexuality and other protected characteristics.*

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