Core Word Curriculum Cycle 1

Every Child a Confident Learner

Curriculum intent

Every child has a right to communicate, be understood and participate in school life. Our Core Word Curriculum develops purposeful, functional communication for pupils who need additional support with spoken language, understanding, interaction or access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). We prioritise meaningful communication: expressing choices and preferences, requesting and refusing, asking for help, sharing attention, commenting and connecting with others.

High-utility words are revisited in motivating, real-life contexts so pupils can build understanding and use their own communication methods, including speech, gesture, signing, symbols, communication boards and devices. Teaching is ambitious, individualised and linked to pupils' communication profiles, EHCP outcomes and next steps. The curriculum builds foundations for language, reading and writing without assuming that all pupils learn in the same sequence.

Curriculum implementation

Our year-one sequence follows six familiar half-term themes and introduces or revisits core vocabulary in weekly focuses. Adults model the target words repeatedly on the pupil's established AAC system, while speaking naturally and responding to every meaningful communication attempt. The word of the week is a teaching focus, not a limit on vocabulary available to pupils; existing AAC vocabulary remains accessible. Teaching includes shared stories, songs, play, sensory exploration, practical tasks, interaction, classroom routines and community experiences. Staff model words without requiring imitation or withholding preferred activities until a child responds. Learning is repeated in short, accessible opportunities throughout the week, including at least two planned teaching encounters, and is generalised across people, places and activities.

Staff use individual starting points to adapt symbol size, positioning, sensory demands, processing time, partner support and response modes. Families and therapists contribute to consistency where appropriate. Pupils continue to access phonological awareness, books, print, writing and appropriately adapted systematic synthetic phonics when suitable; AAC and core vocabulary complement rather than automatically replace literacy teaching.

Curriculum impact

We expect pupils to become increasingly confident, understood and independent communicators. Progress may include noticing and anticipating a modelled word, demonstrating comprehension, making an intentional choice, initiating a message, combining words, using a word for a new purpose, or communicating with a wider range of partners. Speech is not required as evidence of success.

Staff capture a baseline and review progress at least termly through observations, AAC use, work or photographs where appropriate, pupil and family voice, and progress towards personalised EHCP and communication outcomes. We look for spontaneous, meaningful use across settings, not simply the ability to repeat a word in a lesson. Leaders review curriculum access, consistency of adult modelling, pupil participation and evidence of generalisation, then refine teaching and provision.

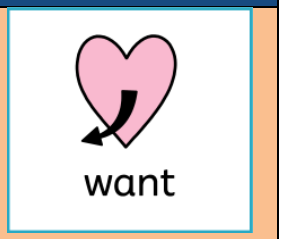
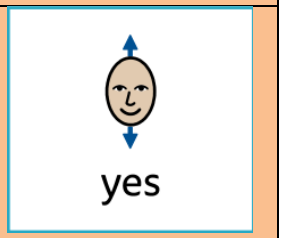
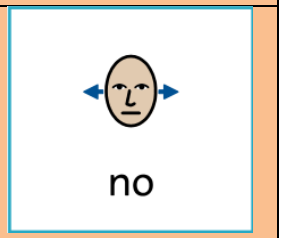
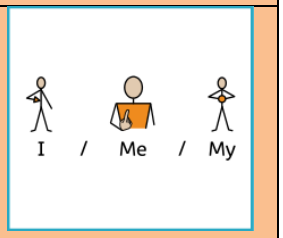
Teaching principles at a glance

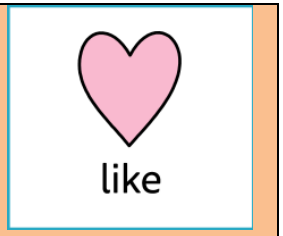
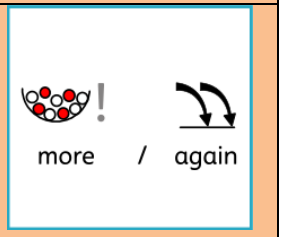
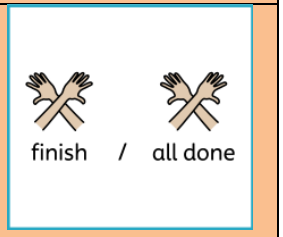
Principle	What this looks like
Communication first	Respect every mode of communication; respond to requests, refusals, comments and shared attention.
Model, do not test	Adults point to words on AAC while talking, with no expectation of immediate imitation.
Keep AAC available	Maintain access to the pupil's wider communication system; do not restrict vocabulary to the weekly word.
Revisit and generalise	Use the same words across play, routines, stories, outdoor learning and home links.
Individualise literacy	Offer books, print, sound play and adapted phonics according to assessment and specialist advice.
Assess authentic use	Record independence, function, partner, context and level of prompting.

Curriculum sequence (Cycle 1)

Autumn A | All About Me

Focus question: How can I tell others about myself, what I want and what I need?

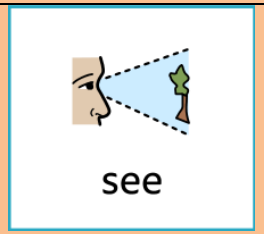
Week commencing	Core word / review	Communication and learning opportunity	Visual cue (original illustration)
Wed 2 Sep 2026	Week 1 – Want	I can communicate what I want about myself, my choices and the activities I enjoy.	
Mon 7 Sep 2026	Week 2 – Yes	I can use or respond to yes when talking about my own choices, preferences and needs.	
Mon 14 Sep 2026	Week 3 – No	I can use or respond to no to show what I do not want or like, and to express my boundaries.	
Mon 21 Sep 2026	Week 4 – I / Me / My	I can communicate about myself, my body, my family and the things that belong to me.	

Mon 28 Sep 2026	Week 5 – Like	I can show or communicate what I like about myself, my interests, favourite things and experiences.	
Mon 5 Oct 2026	Week 6 – Help	I can ask for or indicate help with something I am doing, such as dressing, eating or managing my belongings.	
Mon 12 Oct 2026	Week 7 – More / Again	I can ask for more or again when I want to repeat a favourite activity, song, game or experience.	
Mon 19 Oct 2026	Week 8 – Finish / All done	I can communicate when I have finished an activity about me or no longer want to continue.	

Autumn B | Weather and Seasons

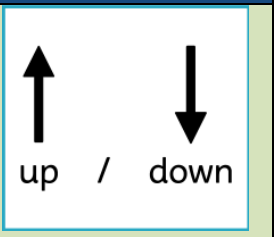
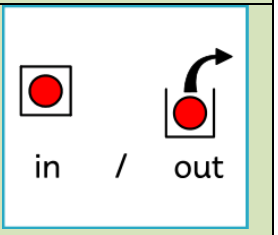
Focus question: How can I communicate during movement, outdoor exploration and shared experiences?

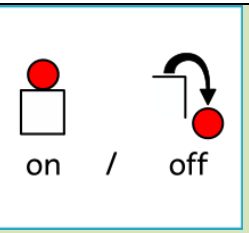
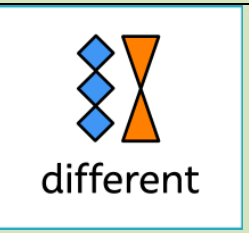
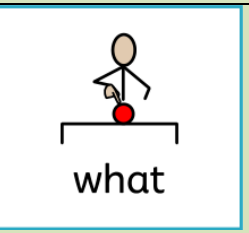
Week commencing	Core word / review	Communication and learning opportunity	Visual cue (original illustration)
Tue 3 Nov 2026	Week 9 – Stop	I can communicate stop during weather-related movement, outdoor exploration and sensory experiences.	 stop
Mon 9 Nov 2026	Week 10 – Go	I can use or respond to go when moving outdoors to explore different weather and seasonal conditions.	 go
Mon 16 Nov 2026	Week 11 – Wait	I can communicate wait while taking turns with weather equipment or waiting to observe a change in the weather.	 wait
Mon 23 Nov 2026	Week 12 – Turn	I can take or request a turn in weather and seasonal games, experiments or outdoor activities.	 turn
Mon 30 Nov 2026	TERM 1 RECAP – Weeks 1–12	I can revisit and use the first 12 core words while exploring weather, seasonal changes and familiar outdoor routines.	↻ **Revisit words**

Mon 7 Dec 2026	Week 13 – Need	I can communicate what I need to experience different weather, such as a coat, hat, wellies or shelter.	
Mon 14 Dec 2026	Week 14 – See	I can look towards, notice or draw another person's attention to what I can see in the sky and the outdoor environment.	

Spring A | Spring and Growth

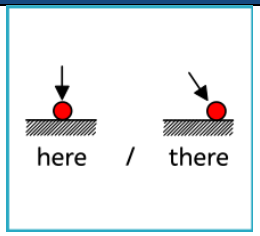
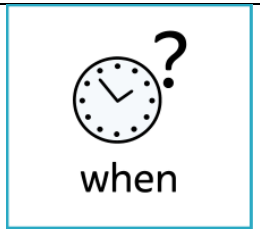
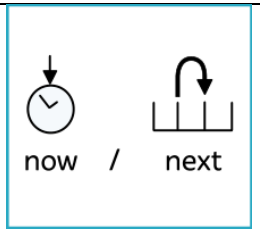
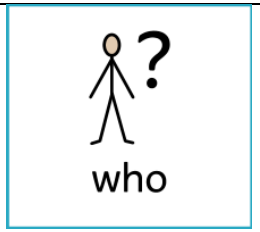
Focus question: How can I describe actions, positions, differences and discoveries?

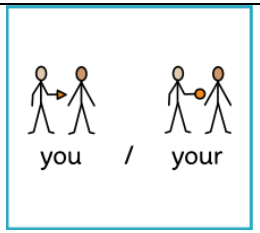
Week commencing	Core word / review	Communication and learning opportunity	Visual cue (original illustration)
Tue 5 Jan 2027	Week 15 – Up / Down	I can explore and communicate how plants grow up and how roots grow down.	
Mon 11 Jan 2027	Week 16 – In / Out	I can put seeds in soil, water in a container and explore what goes in and comes out during planting.	

Mon 18 Jan 2027	Week 17 – On / Off	I can explore what goes on and off during planting and growing activities, such as lids, lights or equipment.	
Mon 25 Jan 2027	Week 18 – Different	I can notice and communicate how seeds, plants, leaves and flowers are different.	
Mon 1 Feb 2027	Week 19 – What	I can explore and respond to what questions about seeds, plants and the changes that happen as things grow.	
Mon 8 Feb 2027	Week 20 – Where	I can explore and respond to where questions by finding seeds, roots, shoots, leaves and growing plants.	

Spring B | Creatures Great and Small

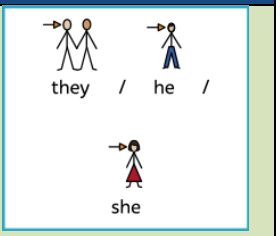
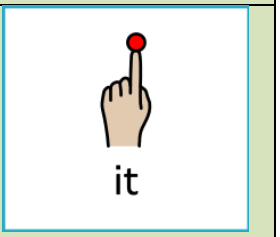
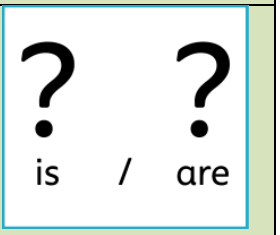
Focus question: How can I share information and ask questions about living things?

Week commencing	Core word / review	Communication and learning opportunity	Visual cue (original illustration)
Mon 22 Feb 2027	Week 21 – Here / There	I can communicate where creatures are by using here and there when exploring habitats and small-world play.	
Mon 1 Mar 2027	Week 22 – When	I can explore when animals are active, when they eat and how their routines or life cycles change.	
Mon 8 Mar 2027	Week 23 – Now / Next	I can use or understand now and next when sequencing animal care, life-cycle activities or a creature-themed story.	
Mon 15 Mar 2027	Week 24 – Who	I can identify or ask who is in an animal story, who cares for animals or who is helping during an activity.	
Mon 22 Mar 2027	TERM 2 RECAP – Weeks 13–24	I can revisit and use core words from this programme section while exploring creatures, their habitats and animal stories.	↻ **Revisit words**

Mon 29 Mar 2027	Week 25 – You / Your	I can direct communication towards you or talk about your animal, model, picture or contribution during shared exploration.	

Summer A | Community and Culture

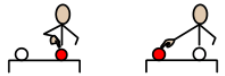
Focus question: How can I communicate about people, objects and shared community activities?

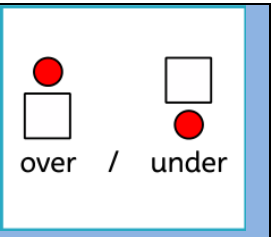
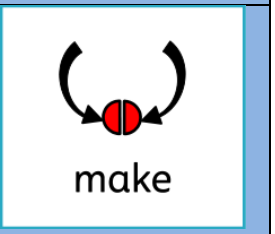
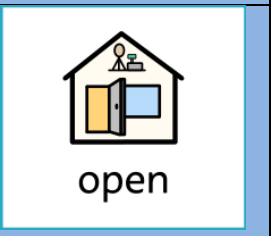
Week commencing	Core word / review	Communication and learning opportunity	Visual cue (original illustration)
Mon 19 Apr 2027	Week 26 – They / He / She	I can use or respond to they, he or she when talking about people in my community, families and cultural stories.	
Mon 26 Apr 2027	Week 27 – It	I can use or respond to it when exploring objects, places, food, music and materials from our community.	
Mon 3 May 2027	Week 28 – Is / Are	I can describe people, places and things in my community using is and are, with words, symbols or AAC.	

Mon 10 May 2027	Week 29 – Get	I can communicate about getting the resources, objects or ingredients needed for a shared community or cultural activity.	 get
Mon 17 May 2027	Week 30 – Put	I can communicate about putting objects in the right place when preparing, sorting or organising resources for a shared activity.	 put
Monday 24th May 2027	TERM 2 RECAP – Week 31	I can revisit and use the core words from this final programme section in familiar school routines and activities.	↻ **Revisit words**

Summer B | Our School

Focus question: How can I use my words more independently throughout school?

Week commencing	Core word / review	Communication and learning opportunity	Visual cue (original illustration)
Mon 7 Jun 2027	Week 32 – All	I can communicate about all of us joining in and using all the resources during familiar school activities.	 all
Mon 14 Jun 2027	Week 33 – This / That	I can use this and that to make choices about classroom equipment, books, activities and places around school.	 this / that

Mon 21 Jun 2027	Week 34 – Over / Under	I can explore and communicate position by moving over and under equipment or describing places around our school.	
Mon 28 Jun 2027	Week 35 – Make	I can communicate about making something for our classroom, school environment or a shared school project.	
Mon 5 Jul 2027	Week 36 – Open	I can communicate about opening classroom resources, books, containers, doors and equipment.	
Mon 12 Jul 2027	TERM 3 RECAP – Weeks 25–36	I can revisit and use the core words from this final programme section in familiar school routines and activities.	↻ **Revisit words**
Mon 19 Jul 2027	END-OF-YEAR CONSOLIDATION	I can show what I can communicate independently and with support, and practise using familiar words with different adults and in different areas of school.	↻ **Revisit words**

Progression and assessment

Emerging	Developing	Extending
Notices or attends to adult modelling; shows anticipation or recognition in a familiar routine.	Responds meaningfully to a word with gesture, gaze, action, symbol, AAC or speech, with decreasing support.	Initiates or combines messages; transfers vocabulary to different activities, partners and settings.

How this relates to phonics and language development

Core-word teaching supports communication and early literacy access, but it is not itself a validated systematic synthetic phonics programme. Being non-speaking or autistic does not, on its own, mean that phonics is inappropriate. Decisions about phonics and other literacy instruction must be individual, evidence-informed and regularly reviewed. Some pupils benefit from parallel teaching of phonological awareness, print concepts, letter–sound links and decoding using accessible response methods.

Some pupils communicate using learned chunks or scripts. Staff should value these communicative attempts and model flexible language, without assuming that all autistic pupils follow a single “gestalt language processing” pathway or that this determines the order in which literacy must be taught.

Evidence base and useful references

Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM), First 40 core vocabulary: a practical AAC vocabulary starting point; not a prescribed UK curriculum. AAC and aided language modelling are supported by a wider body of communication research. The specific Sensory Classroom Core Word Programme is a commercial resource and is not presented as DfE- or EEF-endorsed. Relevant guidance includes the EYFS statutory framework, the Engagement Model for pupils working below national curriculum assessment standards where applicable, the SEND Code of Practice, and the EEF guidance on oral language and early literacy (which should not be interpreted as validation of this specific scheme).

Programme resource: https://sensoryclassroom.org/products/core-word-programme-app

What parents and visitors will see

Pupils having real opportunities to communicate; accessible AAC in everyday use; adults modelling words naturally; meaningful participation in shared activities; clear links between weekly vocabulary and the wider curriculum; and individual evidence of progress over time. Our goal is not to teach a list of words in isolation, but to help every child communicate with greater agency and confidence.