



FOOTSTEPS

EPISODE 1 TRANSCRIPT

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Hello there and welcome to *Footsteps*. Thank you so much for taking the time to join us.

This brand new podcast from First Steps Together will showcase the important world of specialist education, which is often in the headlines.

Now every month we're going to explore the people, the approaches, the ideas that shape our schools while also hearing from our students as well.

And just like our students studying in our classrooms, we want you to feel like you have a strong understanding of the topic, in this case, specialist education.

Now, whether you're a parent, guardian, distant family or are just interested in our work, we'll be showcasing our staff, our tips, our tricks, and our insights into young people with additional needs.

Now let me introduce myself. I'm Nick, the Communications Officer here at First Steps Together. I was actually identified as autistic aged 20 before learning of my ADHD identity last year.

I've worked as a on-air journalist for the BBC and Sky and been an assistant producer on Chris Packham's *Inside Our Autistic Minds* BBC documentary series. I've also experience as a neurodiversity consultant.

So it's 2026, let's get this show going. We've made it through January and in this episode we'll be speaking to the Executive Headteacher and Chief Executive Officer.

You'll also be hearing from a Head of School and student to get the lowdown on life at First Steps Together. That's all on this episode of *Footsteps*.

EPISODE THEME

So let's get going with this brand new era.

In the busy First Steps Together headquarters, I've now been joined by one of the two Chief Executive Officers, Matthew Higham.

How are you feeling about all this, Matt?

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Hi, Nick. Thanks for having me today on the new podcast. It's very exciting.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

We've also been joined by Natalie Ogden, officially our Executive Headteacher for all of our six schools. You've been moving into a new role as Group Strategic Lead. Welcome.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Thank you so much for having me.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, good to see you. We're going to start with you, Matt. I mean, do you want to explain a little bit about First Steps Together then? How would you describe the organisation generally at the moment now? Because it's more than education, isn't it, these days?

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Yeah, I think over the last 6 to 12 months, we've kind of diversified out into different areas, obviously, all still surrounding children, young people, especially around the SEND. So I think it's been a really exciting time that actually, here we started off as an alternative provision and obviously over the last few years, we've kind of progressed into obviously independent schools.

We've seen a large growth in the group itself and like I say, over the last six months, we've kind of diversified out into the care sector and obviously to the transport sector as well but like I say, still keeping that main focus, it's around supporting young people and vulnerable young people in the Manchester, Tameside and Derbyshire area.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And so give me an insight into your background and why you started this company.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

So I was a school governor at a local school for a number of years, and I could see some potential gaps in the education, actually,

and especially for children who, you know, SEND learners and I kind of was a bit of a situation of kind of looking and saying 'what's going wrong and what can we do better?' and I think one of the biggest things from that was actually doing a lot of research and speaking to a lot of parents, SEND parents, to understand is that, how do they feel as a parent of a child in SEND in the education system or the care system, et cetera, and stuff, to kind of understand what's going right and what's, it's possibly an area of opportunity rather for us to kind of look at and actually how we can best support them.

And some of them have been some really easy fixes, but I think one of the biggest things for us, obviously, is listening to our parents, listening to our carers, and listen to what they need and actually, they know their children better than everybody else, so, it's been a great opportunity for us to kind of pull all that together and create this vision of the ethos as we move forward.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And the organisation has grown remarkably quickly, hasn't it? I mean, I joined in December and it feels like so much has happened so quickly. So yeah, give us an insight as to when you

decided to make that decision to jump into care homes and transport and how that actually comes together as a whole.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

I think as a leadership team, it's something we've always talked about over the last 12 months and we kind of looked at the journey where we come up to and I think over the last 12 months, we've kind of put a lot more focus on the strategic oversight of the group and I think from there, it's allowed us to kind of pre-plan and actually look at where we can best support and it's always, our decisions are always kind of directed by listening to the people who matter, so again, listening to our young people, listening to our parents, the agencies we work with, whether it be local authorities or other partners out there.

It's actually understanding how we can best support and where we can kind of help bridge that gap, especially in areas such as Tameside and Manchester. I'm a local, I'm a local lad, so again, from there, it's about how we can best support local people to be able to move forward, obviously in SEND education and carer sector.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Fantastic. Thanks. Thanks so much for that. Natalie, you're executive headteacher for all six of our schools. You're moving into this new role as Group Strategic Lead. How has this January been for you? A busy start, I suspect.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

It's been extremely busy, but really, really amazing, to be honest. The amount of consultations that we've got coming through for our new learners that are going to access our six schools is absolutely brilliant, so yeah, working really hard to make sure that we're the right place for them.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, you don't stop, I notice! And give me an insight into your journey here at First Steps Together, because you've sort of rapidly moved up the ranks here.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Yes, I have. I think that it's all been done sort of quite organically to be honest. I think just to start off with saying that, like Matthew said, the biggest thing for us is the support of the parents and supporting these young people that are coming through.

I am that parent, I am that parent of a daughter of an EHCP and I know the struggles of parents and carers and to make sure that they're getting the right schools for their children so that's what pushes me forward really.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. That's great, and in terms of this year and your ethos and how you work, what are your thoughts and what are you hoping for this year?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think my biggest hope this year is that all our learners feel safe and valued within your schools. That's the priority for me, that they're accessing a broad and balanced curriculum and that they're enjoying being in school.

And I think that a lot of the feedback that I get back from parents and carers is that this is the first time that they've actually felt accepted and wanting to go into school, so for me, that is the biggest win and I hope to carry that through for the rest of this year.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And hugely rewarding, I imagine, as you do that.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Thanks so much for the moment, guys. Now, for you listening, I want to take you on a whistle-stop tour of our schools across the region. In Wythenshaw, to the south of Manchester, we have The Watkin and Kershaw Wood Manchester, not far away in Northenden.

Then over in the east of Manchester, we have Stansfield House near Ashton-under-Lyme, Tame Bank in Stalybridge, Peak Forest in Hyde, and Kershaw Wood Glossop in, yeah, you've guessed it, Glossop. Don't worry, there won't be a quiz at the end of all this!

Now I want to take you to Peak Forest and Paul Sunderland because he's been talking to me about the start of a new year and what that break over Christmas represents in terms of momentum. I caught up with him last week and started by asking him about student expectations after a few weeks off.

Paul Sunderland, Head of School, Peak Forest

I think we have to be realistic and we understand that the students have had a good bit of time off and there's a lot of unstructured kind of routines for our students once they do go home and spend that Christmas break so we have to be realistic that the first couple of weeks are going to be difficult, but that's kind of why we're in this industry and working with the students that we're working with, so it's nothing that we haven't dealt with before and nothing we won't deal with again.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

How have students responded to being back, emotionally at the start of this year? I imagine it's been a bit up and down.

Paul Sunderland, Head of School, Peak Forest

Yeah, like I said, it's a little bit up and down initially, but I do think the vast majority of our students, especially, they do love being here so we have quite positive relationships with our students and, in general, I do think that most of them are quite looking forward to and excited to get back to school so that makes it a little bit easier.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And what's most helpful for parents to know at this time of year looking forward to the next two terms and how they can support and be aligned with you guys?

Paul Sunderland, Head of School, Peak Forest

For me I think parents just need to understand that they will be ups and downs, as we understand, but they need to understand that there'll be times where the student can't wait to get up out of bed and get in the taxi and come to school, but it's times where it's a fight for them as well.

I think the cold and dark mornings at the moment obviously make things a little bit more difficult, but just kind of trust the process and understand that there will be ups and downs, but there's a lot of good things going on at the school, and if they can fight the battles from their side, we'll continue to fight ours.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

So Nat, I was going to ask you, I mean, how tough is the new year because I imagine for both staff and students, it's a new year, it's high expectations, I guess, but give me an insight about how tough it is.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

It really is a tough time, I think, like you said, for students and for the teachers and the whole staff team really, I think what we have to be mindful of is that a lot of our students, they've had that break off and then coming back and being able to regulate their emotions, and actually sometimes the anxiety of coming back to school so I think that was our big push at the beginning was to make sure that they were knowing what they were coming back to and that there we were there with open arms ready to accept them back in so yeah, it's been slightly difficult, but I feel that it's been a really successful January as well.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, adapting to that new routine is tricky for anyone, but particularly those with additional needs.

I also asked Paul actually what he thought defined a good January.

Paul Sunderland, Head of School, Peak Forest

The main kind of factor is attendance so ensuring that we have got good attendance, students are coming in and then the other main kind of factor that we look at is behaviour, ensuring that not only students are attending, they're also coming in and accessing their

lessons so I think our January so far, I've had good attendance since we came back and the engagement in general has been pretty good so it's all positive at the moment.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And attendance is something you're working really hard on, isn't it, guys? Tell me a little bit about this new partnership you've got with Inclusive Attendance.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Attendance, you'll see it all in the national newspaper at the moment, there's a big focus from Ofsted and obviously just in generally in the national news on attendance and I think we need to kind of be really clear in the fact is that attendance will always be one of our biggest priorities, but also there's a number of factors that contribute towards that and whilst the data informs us what the attendance is, it goes a lot deeper than that and actually it goes deep into everyday practice and we embed it into everyday school practice so, how do we best support our parents and carers to ensure that attendance is there?

And I think, as we talked about the Inclusive Attendance scheme that we're also going to be part of, and it is, it's just kind of, it's an

accreditation to kind of look at how we are and how we can move forward and I think we're very privileged to be working with Inclusive Attendance as we move forward but again, that still doesn't take away the fact is that our main priority always has to be day-to-day practice on attendance, supporting wellbeing and mental health for students and actually digging a little bit deeper and actually breaking down them barriers because a child who's not attending a school, there is a number of factors the reason why that child's not attending, and it's our job as professionals to break that down, actually, what support can we put in place?

And I think, the general ethos across First Steps Together is that we do work on very small wins and actually small wins make big wins, so looking at actually getting a child through that door is actually a small win, and actually then it's our job as professionals to how we engage them in learning, and I think we've kind of covered it previously in the fact is that there's been such so many ups and downs for these young people through disengagement in education or potentially even the wrong settings, and actually it's our job now that hopefully we can make First Steps Together their last education setting until they move further on to obviously post 16 from there. So attendance always will be a priority, but it'll be done in the right way.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, I know as somebody who's autistic that regulation is such a big part of it and I was going to ask you, obviously families are so much more increasingly aware about mental health and individual circumstances, and how do you ensure the approach doesn't feel pressurising for those who obviously value well-being and mindset as well as attendance?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think that's it. That's a really good point that you made there. I think that a hell of a lot of parents and carers, they do feel the pressure because we do have students that wake up in the morning and there's good days and there's bad days and it's about us working alongside them and at First Steps Together, one thing that I'm most proud of is our pastoral support that we give to parents and carers.

And I think it's about that open communication, and if they are struggling, why are they struggling and what can we do to help these parents and carers along with that? So it's definitely a Group approach and it's a partnership and it's working well at the moment.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Yeah, it just kind of echoes what you're saying there. It's about, so many times in schools it's very generic so it's a letter going out saying your attendance is at this but actually, let's dig deeper than that, actually let's pick up the phone to parents, do home visits, have these meetings in school, but actually in an inclusive way, so again, it's showing parents we are here to support you.

We're not here to pressurise you or fine you or send out a stage one, stage two letter. It's actually, we're here to actually understand and actually how we can, as a collective, break them barriers down and this is where the home to school kind of partnership comes in place and it's something we really do pride ourselves on and it does come back from parents and carers that that's something they really do, they do like from First Steps Together.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Yeah, and I think obviously the sense of all this is, we can't forget, is the child's voice. It's about speaking to that child and seeing why they're struggling to get into school and what can we do to make things a little bit easier and making sure that the focus is always central to that student.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. Yeah, I suppose it's building that engagement, isn't it?

Absolutely. I actually want to play you this, which is one of our students, who we're choosing not to name, but talking about what they'd say to an alien if one landed at their school. I spoke to them with fidget toy in hand the other day.

Student

I would probably welcome them and then say... that they're going to be fine here and that it's going to be the best.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Very sweet, isn't it? I mean, how do you track student wellbeing generally? I suppose that's something that's hugely important. How do you kind of keep track of that?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think student advice is massive and we do have key worker time. We also have enrichment time and it's really important that they're involved in everyday school practices, so we have Student Council, which is absolutely amazing and they get some perks as part of being on that student council, but we're able then to have a bit of a deeper look into see how the students are feeling and

what can we do to make their school day better and some of the ideas are a little bit out there. We've asked for a car in the playground and all these other things, which we can't do at the moment, but there is a hell of a lot that we can do.

And I think for our students as well, so many have never ever been on a school trip. They've never been out on the minibus. We have so many enrichment activities that go on outside of school and the school trips. It's amazing to see.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. Yeah, I suppose it's working together, not just parents, but students too, Matt.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Exactly and it's creating that inclusive environment. It's creating an environment where the students feel valued, they feel they've got a safe place to go to and we do see this, students will come through from, like I say, previous settings or disengagement of education, and they've never been listened to, and I think, we've always started out from the start is that, child's voice does matter and again, we need to kind of look at how that creates that inclusive environment in school and the data shows that if

students feel valued in school and if students feel included in day-to-day practice in school, we're more than likely to see better results and we're not talking about academic results, we're talking about their own personal development and actually looking at how they take that forward into further life with them as well.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Absolutely. Well, we'll hear a bit more of the student voice. Here's that same student giving me a little bit more insight into life at one of our schools in the east of Manchester.

Student

I'm a really big Pokémon collector. It came from an old group at one of my old schools, got one from one of my friends, and then I just got into it when I got home.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And what is it about Pokémon you enjoy so much?

Student

The collection and looking at it all, and it just looks really cool.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Wow. I imagine there's so many different characters and different things you can do with it, aren't there? And in terms of the last few weeks here, and obviously coming back after the new year, give me an idea of what you've been up to at school recently.

Student

Just getting by, just doing my best like I always do.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm-hm. What makes you happy at school? What's the most enjoyable part, would you say?

Student

The teachers and the support that the school gives.

When I'm going through a hard time, Mr Sunderland would help me and if I've got a question, I'd talk to the corresponding teacher to that subject and just they help me learn every day, even things that I didn't even know.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Do you travel quite a bit in the morning then? Give me an insight into that.

Student

It's probably about like an hour trip.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Wow. Is that is that quite an exhausting trip?

Student

No, it doesn't, it's not that exhausting, like, if I need to, I'll have a sleep in the car, but then I'll be fine.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Quite amazing.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Very, very, yeah it is.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

What are your initial reactions to that?

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Just immensely proud. I mean, I'm tearing up, actually.

I do get very emotional, but yeah, really, really proud and just to hear his voice, to say that he does feel accepted and he does feel

listened to. That's what we're here for, and that makes everything that we've put in place worthwhile, so really, really pleased.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, I can imagine there's been a lot of hard work over this first [month], January, and to hear that must be quite great, Matt.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Yeah, it's really nice to hear. I think it kind of just reaffirms what we've always talked about is that everything has got to be child-centred and, like I say, to hear that child, that student, talk to us about how they feel accepted and where they need to go to, that tells us all that actually the people we're putting trust in, so whether the leaders, teachers, support staff, who are doing an immense job in the schools are doing a fantastic job and again it's about reaffirming that with them, that you are making a difference to these young people so continue to do what you're doing.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm, absolutely. I'm sure we'll hear some more insights from students as we go on every month.

Matt, he was talking there about the transport side of things and that kind of brings us nicely on to the other parts of the business outside of education, the care homes and the transport services. So where did that come from, and do you want to give me a sort of start with transport because that very much aligns with what that student said there?

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Obviously from a transport point of view at First Steps Together, it's always been how do we look at them barriers to learning and one of the biggest barriers we find is that the access to transport of getting young people into schools is very hit and miss and I think it's because the pressure that's being put on local authorities to be able to deliver that transport with the right providers. We are actively already now supporting some of our learners in regards to getting them to school and away from school whilst they are waiting for local authorities to agree that transport in a way.

And I think the biggest thing for us is that, the transport application with local authorities does take a long time and I think to me, that is again, looking what we talked about, it's about that barrier to learning, and again, if we can put something in place to

support that as an interim measure to get them into school, because some of these young people have waited, a number of weeks, months, or some of them even years to get the place that they deserve so again, we don't want to prolong that any longer, so again, the support is there for that, and I think we are working very closely with local authorities, particularly Manchester and Tameside and we are in our very early days with transport.

But it's about the local authorities understanding what can we do to best support them and their strategy and all the areas that they're struggling with in regards to accessing the right transport for local young people, I'm hearing that transport's come in from sometimes the other side of Derbyshire to pick up children in Tameside to move them around and stuff.

It's not right, and the student kind of mentioned, an hour journey it is, it's a big journey for them, it's clearly not affecting him, obviously but again, from there, it's a big journey, and we want to look at that and actually how we can best support them to get them into school feeling regulated, feeling ready to learn and actually, sometimes we find these barriers of transport are causing further delays with that.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, I suppose it's how you start the day is such a big part of it and, as I say, he seemed quite relaxed there, but how detrimental can those journeys be to school when you don't have any sort of conversation or insight? It's quite an isolated experience, I imagine?

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Absolutely and I think one of the biggest things from the transport service that we're providing at First Steps Together Transport is that giving our transport staff the same training as school staff, so actually having specific SEN training, so again, making sure them conversations are flowing in the morning if they're required, getting that child regulated, ready to hand over to the school and we do find that, lot of transport companies out there don't have the extensive training that we put in place and it's all about regulation, supporting SEN needs, but more importantly as well, we hear from parents that the communication between the transport providers and the parents and carers is very limited, so again, from ours, it's about looking at them areas of concern, what the parents have brought to us and actually how can we do it and how can we do it better and I think that's been really evidential through the work that we've done, the research work

and obviously putting it into practice is that, having the right drivers and the right personal assistants in the transport vehicles, [it's] detrimental to that young person and let's start that journey off, on the right way in the morning so.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

I think one big thing that came to mind for me was that a hell of a lot of the transport that's provided at the moment, they're not able to provide them medically trained passenger assistants. We have a hell of a lot of students that have got medical needs that do wait excessively longer to actually be able to get transport into school so when we brought this transport, it's sort of like a wraparound service really, and I think the consistency of the staff is a big thing as well to keep them children regulated and knowing that it's going to be more often than not that same friendly face that meets you each morning.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And I imagine that will really help the staff in the schools as well and the care homes in terms of having them almost warmed up, I guess, at that point.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

It certainly will. I think that's been a big thing for staff, the hand over as well, from transport to school, it can be really robust and it can be really in-depth as to how that morning's gone for that child and it gives us the heads up of what we need to do to put in place, whether it be zones or regulations, a soft landing.

So many of our students need a soft landing in the morning and by having that transport provided by First Steps Together, we're able to give them that.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Because transitions can be a really tricky thing, particularly for those with additional needs.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Yeah, absolutely and like you say, it's about getting them regulated so again, that they're ready to learn when they come into school, rather than spending that time in the morning trying to bring them down from a journey that's maybe took a little bit too long or like you said before, they've had no interaction with the drivers or the personal assistants in there. It's about having the right staff in the right places to support these young people.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. And the care homes, just briefly, I mean, we've got 6 care homes. Give us an insight as to what you're trying to do. I guess it's the wraparound care you talk about, isn't it?

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Absolutely. We're seeing a very high demand on children in care, obviously, at First Steps Together, and that's something we do pride ourselves on, is that the systems that we have in place to support these children, who are unfortunately in the care system, is that we can support them and actually they get as up the same opportunities as a child who's in a mainstream family, with their own parents, et cetera.

And I think it's about, like you say, giving them that full wraparound care and the fact is that we know these children, so, we know we find that having the children in our care and in our education and actually being supported by our transport service, we have a full overview of how that child looks and how we can best support, so literally 24 hours a day, we can look at that and it's nice to see that, then different areas of the group, so the education, the care and the transport, are regularly meeting to actually discuss these and actually discuss how we can best

support and making sure if we do get any barriers that do fall in there, it's actually, as a collective, how we can break them down to make sure that child gets the best start in life.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose working together under one roof makes everyone's life easier.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Absolutely. Yeah, it's nice to kind of see the team coming together and like you're saying and from a strategy point of view, it's understanding how we keep at the forefront with that our children and young people are the main focus at all times for us.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, thank you so much, Nat, and to you, Matt. Good luck for the rest of the month, I guess, and I'm sure we'll see you as time goes on but thank you.

Matthew Higham, Chief Executive Officer

Thank you very much. Cheers, Nick.

Natalie Ogden, Group Strategic Lead

Thank you very much.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Well, as Matt and Natalie quietly head off into the First Steps

Together universe, we are now joined by Nick Ledger, our Head of Business. He's also technically my boss, I should say.

There are plenty of questions I could ask him but I'll hold off on that because today we're talking about internet safety, a serious subject, and having heard more than a few horror stories myself, this felt like a really good moment to look at how our systems help keep students safe online, but also look at what parents can be doing at home as well. Welcome, Nick, good to see you.

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

Good to be here.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

What systems or tools do we have then in place that monitor and filter online activity in our schools?

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

So late last year, we had an update to Keeping Children Safe in Education, which is a government guideline, so we realised to keep compliant with it, we needed to bring in a system that would monitor, manage the internet access for all of our students so we supply computers for those that work from home. Some students work from home. We supply those, which obviously we needed some control over.

And we supply the computers, the laptops for those that work in the schools, so we invested in a system called SENSO. It monitors, identifies and manages, so it will monitor the access that any student is on, it will then identify if there's a risk, so we've set certain protocols in place and then we can manage that, so if there's a request from a teacher to maybe extend that protocol, maybe they want to see a certain YouTube video, whereas YouTube on the whole we block at the moment, if they want to see a certain YouTube video for a learning exercise, then we can allow that, just that specific video within YouTube, so it gives us that management as well and it's done via individual users, so we can do that just for a certain set of individuals.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Oh right, so you can customise them and really make it an individualised experience for each student then?

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

Absolutely. Each school has its own individual login so that we can identify down to a single user. Each school has its own domain, if you like, staff have a domain, office staff have another domain. We do a lot of buying in the office, whereas we don't really allow that kind of buying when on. And also, we have an HR department who need to check out people's Facebook profiles to make sure that they're not open, whereas we wouldn't want maybe teachers or students in schools on Facebook.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Mm. No, that makes sense. So I guess it is a constant balancing act between obviously blocking that harmful content and then still allowing students to have that exploration that is supervised and all the rest of it.

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

Yeah, it's a difficult one, but luckily the SENSO system was designed and built with Keeping Children Safe in Education in mind.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

And so that's on the back of legislation that's changed from the government that we're obviously having to adhere to here?

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

Absolutely, yes.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Amazing, and so I mean, as I mentioned, I've heard some horror stories myself. What kind of unique online risks, would you say, those with additional needs tend to face? I'm guessing, you can get down a rabbit hole and particularly with myself, that kind of obsessive mentality, I guess, can be particularly challenging.

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

It can be and especially if you go on social media, you can get to what people call doomscrolling, where you start off on one subject and it just takes you through a plethora of other subjects.

Obviously, the content just can stretch to where you don't want it to go, so it's always good to keep that control in hand.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Because those algorithms on social media can be so useful, but also quite harmful in terms of bringing up content that perhaps, oh, I didn't mean to spend too long on watching that and it's come back to trigger me again kind of thing, isn't it?

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

And games nowadays, a child can be playing something as harmless as Minecraft and want to know how to kill a certain animal within Minecraft, and when they search that word kill, it could bring up a whole different subject matter.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

You've got to be so careful, haven't you? And I suppose for parents listening, I mean, what can they be doing at home to reinforce the same sort of online standards that we have in school, because as you say, you want to be keeping track, but not be too over the top and not too controlling, and I suppose it's, again, a delicate balance, but what can they do?

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

Certainly, if they've got phones, their phones should be set up as children phones, you can do that on Apple, you set them up as a family phone and with child access so you just need to create that kind of account. That's how iPhone do it. Android phones, there's a family link that you, it's an app that you can then control, I would definitely suggest that that's how you control the phones because people take their phones everywhere. On the computer front, I would state, maybe not position them in bedrooms, maybe put them in a normal part of the house that you can cast an eye once in a while over, just to make sure what content they're looking into.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I suppose it's an open conversation as well, isn't it? And also there's things like SafeSearch and all these various tools that these systems and browsers all have now, aren't there, to make it easier for parents to have a bit more control?

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

They do but often parents are not as tech savvy as the children.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Yeah, it's all moving so quickly, isn't it and trying to keep up is tricky.

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

It really is and children pick it up a lot quicker than adults so just cast an eye over what they're looking into.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for joining me, Nick.

Nick Ledger, Head of Business

You're welcome.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

I want to give you a bit of an insight now as to what it's like to work here at First Steps Together, because there's so many more jobs than just being a learning support mentor or a teacher. Here's a few minutes of my chat last week with Hayley, who works in payroll.

Hayley Crompton, Payroll Officer

I've done early years since leaving school. I'm a certain age now, so I've done it for quite a few years. I just fancied a change. When I've made the decision to leave early years, I didn't actually know what I wanted to do. I enjoyed the payroll side of the job. I thought, let's build on that. It was very, very different because there was only six members of staff.

I didn't just want to go into any sort of company. I wanted to be somewhere that makes a difference and although I'm not there in the thick of it now with the children, I enjoy the fact that the company I work for go above and beyond for the children in our care. There's new people coming in every day that you're introducing yourself to and there's a real buzz around especially in the main office.

Mainstream schools can be quite overwhelming for children without additional needs so for children, like what we've got in our schools, who have got those additional needs, and just need that little bit of extra support, that's what I really like about First Steps Together, that the children come here and they're allowed to just be who they are.

Nick Ransom, Communications Officer

A huge thank you to Hayley for talking to me and it's worth saying that we've got loads of vacancies here at First Steps Together, just go to firststepstogether.uk to find out more.

Well, that concludes the first episode of Footsteps. Thank you so much for sticking with us and tracing our steps so far in 2026.

We'll be back in March with another episode, but we want to hear from you about what we should be covering.

Head to firststepstogether.uk/footsteps to ask your question.

For now, it's goodbye from our staff and our students here taking their first steps together.