

Meeting with Facebook parents' group

13th October 2017, 10am-12pm, at St Mary's Community Centre

In attendance: Parents (Shelley Eggleston, Sarah Raynes, Rhodri Huws, Clare Jones, Melissa Simmonds, Joanne Ferguson, Natalie Brownell, Deborah Woodhouse), Jayne Ludlam (Executive Director People Portfolio, SCC), Dawn Walton (Director Commissioning, Inclusion and Learning, SCC), Tim Armstrong (Head of SEN, SCC), Robert Carter (Senior Commissioning Manager, Mental Health Portfolio, Sheffield CCG), Scarlett Milward (Children's Commissioning Manager, Sheffield CCG), Katie Monette (SPCF Chair), Eva Juusola (SPCF Participation Coordinator, notes), Edmund Cross (facilitator)

Background

This was the second meeting between parents involved in the Act4SEN Facebook group and senior officers from Sheffield City Council and Sheffield Clinical Commissioning Group. Since several parents involved in the first meeting were unable to attend, an open invitation to parents was extended via the Act4SEN group and several other SEN Facebook groups. Two new parents joined the meeting as a result.

The initial plan had been to focus the meeting on EHC plans. However, since the issues around EHC plans (quality, timeliness, communication with parents, etc.) have been widely discussed and documented, it was felt that going through them again was unlikely to yield new insights. The main focus of the meeting was therefore on improving how we can work together to effect real change.

Update: What has happened since the last meeting in April?

Council officers summarised a number of developments:

- Three dedicated business support officers have been recruited to the SEN Team, which should help to improve communication with parents. These officers will be able to respond to simple enquiries from parents, and they will also ring parents when a request for an EHC needs assessment has been received, and talk them through the process. Parents suggested that more pre-emptive communication with parents should be built into the EHCP processes, e.g. a standard email or text at each step in the process.
- The SEN Team's answerphone message now says that the aim is to respond within three working days, which is council policy. However, this is not consistently being achieved, and some parents reported that they had been waiting for months.
- The Children with Disabilities Team and the SEN Team have merged, and the combined team is headed by Tim Armstrong. The council is currently recruiting an operational manager for the SEN Team, to free up some of Tim's time.
- Tim has implemented a programme of fortnightly training sessions for the SEN Team.
- The council is developing three Early Years centres of excellence, to support early diagnosis.
- The Inclusion Taskforce is moderating the use of the Sheffield Support Grid. Head teachers are starting to challenge each other on inclusion.

- There is an increased focus on avoiding exclusions and placement breakdown, e.g. via the Primary Inclusion Panel and outreach from special schools to mainstream schools.

It was acknowledged that these changes have not yet had an impact on the experience of families. Interventions don't happen early enough, and services are not joined up enough. Parents said that more needed to be done to address the lack of specialist provision for certain groups of pupils, e.g. children with high anxiety who are academically able.

Moving forward: how can we work together more effectively?

We split up into groups to work through a number of issues which had been identified as barriers to partnership working at the last meeting. The following solutions were put forward:

What can we do to build trust? To have trust in professionals, parents need to have confidence that these people have the knowledge, skills and information about their child that they need to do a good job, and that they care. Parents need to feel that they are being listened to, and that professionals understand and follow the law and statutory guidance. For strategic meetings, it is important to have clear terms of reference, and these needs to cover communication with the general public – attendance should not be taken as agreement. It is important to share evidence of progress. There should be maximum transparency.

How can we develop real communication? It is important to use a range of communication methods, but face-to-face communication is vital for building relationships. It can be hard to communicate openly when you are feeling vulnerable. The council should use parents to communicate best practice, and involve parents in delivering training to schools.

How do we achieve coproduction? Coproduction works best if everyone is there at the inception of ideas. Coproduction needs to happen not just with parents, but also between departments. It can be difficult to involve hard-to-reach groups, and to coproduce with groups who have conflicting priorities. How can the council secure collective agreement? What can officers do if what parents ask for is not possible? The challenge to have common pathways between Sheffield City Council and NHS Sheffield is especially problematic. Some parents suggested that alternative funding and operational models could be looked at to ensure staff and systems were amalgamated. This would have the advantage of streamlining the system, being more accessible and transparent to families and have the advantage of possible savings where services from the two organisations overlap.

How can we move from “us and them” to a more productive “us”? We need to be honest about the problems we face, and be clear about the constraints, e.g. budgets, policy. We should look at good practice across the country. We need to acknowledge that we will not always agree.

How can we achieve genuine change? We need to communicate better. Putting little things in place can prevent major issues. We need to change the whole system, not just the working practice in one team.

Thinking *inside* the box: what can we change with existing resources?

We are not making the best use of the resources that we have available. In order to achieve change more quickly, we need to use all the tools at our disposal.

The following actions were agreed:

What needs to be done?	Who will do it?
Re-shape monthly meetings between parent representatives and Tim Armstrong to try and resolve operational issues. Scarlett Milward will join the group. Agree agenda items in advance based on feedback from parents, and publish regular updates for parents (e.g. you said, we did) using social media.	Tim Armstrong
Develop the use of information from development checks of two-year-olds as well as data from reviews in Y4 and Y9 at both SEN Support and EHC Plan level, to use for forward planning	Tim Armstrong
Use the planned refresh of SPCF's "State of Sheffield" survey next year to gather qualitative and quantitative data about the lived experience of families with disabled children in Sheffield and use this to inform the design, commissioning and review of services	SPCF and commissioners
Involve parents in the commissioning process, e.g. using Lambeth/Newport models	Dawn Walton, Scarlett Milward
Find out about the Rotherham Charter for Parent and Child Voice / Genuine Partnerships, as a way of improving coproduction between parents, schools, the local authority and health services	Katie Monette
Trial new ideas on a small scale, and involve parents/children in the development of pilots	Dawn Walton
Use social media channels to provide information to parents more proactively	All