



Strategic review of educational provision for learners with SEND

SPCF response to call for views

January 2018

This document summarises parental feedback received over the past two years through events, outreach, social media, focus groups, Education subgroup meetings and enquiries to our office.

Are there specific groups of learners who are not having their needs met?

Feedback from parents indicates that the following groups of children are not having their needs met successfully:

Children with high-functioning autism and high levels of anxiety: These children don't fit the profile of our special schools as they need access to the full curriculum. They start their school career in mainstream settings, where their needs may not be fully understood and/or accommodated. This often includes a lack of awareness of sensory issues. The Autism Team doesn't normally get involved until attendance has fallen below 80% or the child is seen by CAMHS. Sometimes parents become so concerned about their child's mental health and emotional wellbeing that they feel that home education is their only option. The number of Sheffield children with SEN who are being home educated has been increasing steadily over the past few years.

Children with severe autism and/or severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour: Parents report that our special schools struggle to support this group of children. This is often due to an unsuitable sensory environment as well as a lack of space, as many of these schools are overcrowded. It is also a funding issue, as these children often require 1:1 or even 2:1 support, which our special schools can't provide from the standard per-place funding they receive.

Parental feedback also suggests that **children with PDA** often struggle in mainstream schools and are at a high risk of exclusion. Please refer to the recent report by the PDA society.

What are parents saying about our current range of provision?

Mainstream schools: The main message from parents here is a lack of consistency. There are many pockets of good practice, but information about this is not shared widely; there is a reluctance on the part of head teachers to publicise good inclusive practice for fear of becoming "magnets" for pupils with SEN. While many children with SEND are thriving in mainstream settings, our mainstream schools are not consistently providing an appropriate education for these learners. There are particular concerns about provision in secondary schools. Parents of children in mainstream schools have reported a wide range of issues, which include:

- **Schools not welcoming to pupils with SEND;** parents of children with complex needs often feel that head teachers (especially of secondary schools) don't want their children, and they feel they are being pushed towards specialist placements. Some parents of children with EHC plans have been told that their children's needs cannot be supported from the school's delegated SEN budget, and that the school would not get any extra funding from the locality.

- **Infrequent or ineffective communication with parents**, not making good use of parents' knowledge, not taking parents' concerns seriously. Schools can be quick to dismiss behaviours which are only displayed at home, but which are a result of pressures at school
- **Children's needs not recognised or investigated**. Parents report that schools wait until children have fallen far behind their classmates before taking action
- **Professionals' recommendations not implemented**
- **Failure to respond early to developing crisis**, e.g. attendance issues due to anxiety. Schools can be too slow to request support from specialist services
- **Lack of support when there are ongoing placement issues and the child is not attending school**; some head teachers aggressively pursue their attendance policy, regardless of students' medical needs. Some schools log children as being "educated off site" even when they are not receiving an education. Parents report that the threshold for getting support from the Home and Hospital Education Service is too high, and that the offer is insufficient to meet their child's needs.
- **Rigidity of approach and failure to make reasonable adjustments**, e.g. to behaviour policy, uniform policy, curriculum, number of subjects studied, homework, movement breaks, etc.
- **Staff not sufficiently aware of their duties under the SEND Code of Practice and Equality Act**, e.g. unlawful exclusions, inappropriate use of part-time timetables. Staff are often unable to distinguish between local policy and national legislation
- **Lack of staff expertise**, particularly around behaviour management, anxiety, sensory issues, PDA
- **Lack of access to resources** for children who function below their chronological age
- **Issues around transition**, e.g. poor planning and information sharing, not enough support to help child settle into new setting or support withdrawn too early, staff training provided *after* the child has moved to the setting rather than before, no continuity of staffing, e.g. TA changing every year
- **Insufficient support**, both in lessons and at unstructured times, and lack of pastoral support. Support is sometimes provided when it suits the school, not when the child really needs it. Disputes about 1:1 support are common, especially when a locality won't fund 1:1 support; parents are not informed about alternative models of supporting complex children in mainstream schools.
- **Insecurity of provision**, e.g. support/strategies withdrawn as soon as the child appears to be coping, risk that support may be taken away at any moment to meet statutory duties, or because of other demands on school budgets. This fuels the demand for statutory assessments, as EHC plans are perceived to provide a "safety net".
- **Failure to address problems with peer relationships** (particularly social isolation and bullying). Peer education is often poor or non-existent.
- **Issues with the curriculum**, e.g. teaching not sufficiently differentiated, no suitable qualifications offered (e.g. alternatives to GCSEs), lack of life skills training, lack of flexibility (e.g. not allowing a student to only study one science for GCSEs, not exempting a student from MFL). There is too much pressure on schools to put students through GCSEs, even if this comes at the expense of students' mental health

- **Issues with the physical environment**, e.g. lack of physical access, lack of breakout spaces / quiet areas / space for personal care, buildings that are not secure, sensory environment not suitable. Some children need smaller class sizes and smaller schools, or accommodations to make a large secondary school *feel* smaller (e.g. students stay put and teachers move around, staffed base during lunchtimes etc.). Overcrowding can have a disproportionate impact on pupils with SEND; dining halls can be a particular problem.

The issues listed above are long-standing, but have become more pressing in recent years as real-terms cuts to school budgets have started to have an impact. In an education system that is heavily focused on exam results, there is little incentive for schools to direct their shrinking resources towards inclusion.

The local authority, whilst promoting more mainstream inclusion as the solution to the unsustainable demand for specialist placements, has not taken a lead role in trying to address these often very practical issues. There seems to be a perception that these are minor school-based issues which are separate from key strategic decisions. However, we find that it is precisely these sorts of problems that push children out of the mainstream education system. Unless significant change is achieved and communicated, parents will continue to vote with their feet and use the tribunal route to secure specialist placements for their children.

Special schools: All of our special schools are over roll, but there are still not enough special school places to meet demand - as the general child population has increased, so has the number of children with complex needs. Sheffield has fewer children in special schools (as a percentage of the whole school population) than comparators. Since there has been a significant increase in the number of pupils with autism and we only have one secondary special school for ASD in the Southwest of the city, parents have suggested that a new secondary special school for ASD is needed in the North of the city.

We are often told that there are children in our special schools who would do well in a mainstream setting. However, this appears to apply mainly to our BESD schools, rather than across the board. It would be interesting to analyse the levels of need in our special schools by type of need and by year group.

Talbot Special School appears to have become a “catch-all” for children whose profiles do not fit the designations of our other secondary special schools. Children at this school have a very wide range of needs, and some parents report that this can cause difficulties.

Integrated Resources: Parents have differing views as to whether IRs and hubs are inclusive or not. Some parents feel that having to travel across the city to attend an IR is not inclusive, while others think that the IR model works well and enables children to be included who wouldn't cope with full-time mainstream education. Recently, parents have been raising concerns that IRs have become too rigid about students spending 80% of the time in mainstream classes – parents suspect that this may be due to funding cuts. There is a lack of consensus as to whether IRs should specialise in specific disabilities or be more generic. There is a gap in IR provision for Key Stage 1, and a lack of secondary IRs for students with learning disabilities.

We do not have enough feedback on IRs for vision impairment, hearing impairment and physical disabilities.

Post-16 provision: Parents have raised the following concerns:

- The standard offer of three days of provision per week for students on Foundation Learning and Personal Progress courses at Sheffield College is not adapted to take account of students' individual needs, and is therefore not compliant with the SEND Code of Practice. This states

that “in some cases, courses normally offered over three days may need to be spread over four or five days where that is likely to lead to better outcomes”. Parents who request support over five days often find that Education, Health and Social Care are passing the buck.

- Sheffield College is promoted as a catch-all, but has lost a lot of expertise due to recent redundancies. The College does not provide speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, specialist support for those with vision impairments, or high levels of medical/personal care. Parents report issues even if such provision is set out in their young person’s EHC plan.
- Parents report that support disappears when students move on to level 3.
- There are gaps in provision for specific groups of students, e.g. those with high levels of anxiety who are capable of level 3 qualifications, and those with severe autism / severe learning difficulties and challenging behaviour
- Lack of specialist careers advice
- Lack of understanding of the Mental Capacity Act
- Lack of choice – parents feel that they only options for their young people are catering, retail, horticulture, animal care or construction
- Difficulty engaging social care in the transition process

Early Years provision: There are not enough nursery / assessment places for children with complex needs at special schools. Some parents report that private nurseries are not sufficiently aware of their duties under the Equality Act, e.g. may refuse to take disabled children who are still in nappies, or those with high levels of need. The council’s childcare sufficiency assessments in recent years have been quite generic, and have not included a gaps analysis of Early Years provision for children with SEND.

Out of city provision: There is no graduated step between our local specialist schools and colleges and out-of-city providers. A place at a local special school costs approx. £17,000 per place, but independent specialist providers can charge multiples of that. If there was a specialist school / college in Sheffield that was resourced at a higher level, then many children wouldn’t need an out of city placement. Overcrowding is also an issue – many of our specialist settings do not have the space that they would need to accommodate the most complex students.

Accountability: Many parents report that schools have told them that they haven’t got enough funding to meet their child’s needs. This includes children with EHC plans. When EHC plans are vague about provision (e.g. use expressions such as “would benefit from”), parents have no redress. When EHC plans are specific and quantified, schools, localities and the local authority all blame each other for non-implementation, and families end up as “piggy in the middle”. Parents of children with My Plans have been told that schools don’t have to follow them as they are not statutory. Many parents therefore regard My Plans as just another hoop to jump through in order to get an EHC Plan.

There is a lack of transparency and accountability for the use of SEN funding. Parents feel that by delegating High Needs funding to localities, the local authority has relinquished the few remaining levers that it had over schools.

The LA and the CCG do not monitor whether provision that is set out in EHC plans is actually made. The annual review process is not working as intended, e.g. parents report that requested changes are often not implemented, and decision letters are not sent to parents within 4 weeks.

Placement allocation: Every year, the demand for specialist placements significantly outstrips supply. This has led to conflict between parents and the local authority, which has often been exacerbated by a lack of communication from the SEN Team, especially when statutory timescales have not been adhered to. Parents feel that the allocation process for specialist placements is not transparent, with

decisions made by anonymous panels, and rumours of head teachers “cherry picking” children. Parents report that they struggle to find information about the type of needs that special schools and IRs are able to support, and that professionals are reluctant to offer advice on placements. There is also a lack of information about mainstream schools that offer more specialist provision, such as nurture groups. Parents are confused about the role of the mainstream admissions process in relation to children with EHC plans.

Parents often get very stressed about the admissions process because of the perceived finality of placement decisions. It would be helpful if provision could be made more fluid, for example by offering more split placements and trial placements.

What are parents saying about our specialist support services?

Whether **local authority support services** are meeting needs appears to depend on the child’s disability. While parents of children with sensory impairments generally report high levels of satisfaction with the support received from the Vision Support Service and the Hearing Impaired Service (this is based on our “State of Sheffield 2014” survey – we need more recent feedback), the same does not hold true for other disabilities, particularly autism and dyslexia. This may be due to different service models and funding levels. The capacity of the Autism Team has not kept pace with the rise in the number of children with ASD. Because of this, the service focuses on crisis management, not early intervention.

Parents have highlighted a **lack of behaviour support**, and the high number of fixed-term and permanent exclusions of pupils with SEND in Sheffield bears this out. MAST workers lack the skills to support children with complex needs; their input tends to be time-limited and focussed on generic parenting strategies, which can be counterproductive. Many parents (particularly those in lower socioeconomic groups) feel that services tend to attribute challenging behaviour to poor parenting skills, rather than the child’s disability. We are often contacted by parents who struggle with their child’s aggressive behaviour at home, but cannot access any help.

Parents have reported issues with **NHS therapy services**:

- The capacity of the Speech and Language Therapy Service is a concern. It is not unusual for children to only get one hour of therapist input per year.
- Parents also report a lack of input from the Occupational Therapy service. In many cases, the only service that is offered is a sensory workshop for parents.
- Parents have raised concerns about skills gaps, e.g. there are not enough speech and language therapists with skills in the area of pragmatics, non-verbal children and AAC, and there are not enough occupational therapists trained in sensory integration therapy.
- Some children wait a very long time to access services like Ryegate Psychology and Occupational Therapy.
- Referral pathways to mental health services are too complicated, and this can lead to long delays in accessing support.