



“Countdown to the SEN Reforms”

Transcript of Q&A Session, 14th March 2014, St Mary’s

The following is a transcript of a question & answer session with Mary Collins and Lesley Cheshire from Sheffield City Council and Alasdair Duerden from the Department for Education. We are providing a transcript rather than a video recording due to poor sound quality.

Most of contributions have been recorded verbatim; where sections have been edited by the speaker for the purpose of clarity and accuracy, this has been indicated in the text.

Question 1: How will this whole process impact on training for teachers? The pilots for the EHC plans are being run in special schools and mostly the complaints seem to come from parents of children with special needs in mainstream schools, about lack of understanding and lack of training for staff. Just wondering how it might impact?

Alasdair Duerden (DfE): [edited] We want to make sure all teachers are teachers of SEN. So, the standards for qualified teacher status include a clear focus on meeting the needs of all children, including those with SEN or who are disabled. To help with this we have supported a range of special school placements as part of initial teacher training (ITT), to help trainees draw directly on the specialist expertise that special schools bring. Beyond initial training, schools are responsible for deciding what external support to seek and for setting their own priorities for the continuous professional development of their staff. One of the key reasons we require the SENCO to be a qualified teacher is so that they can effectively advise and contribute to the broader support engaged by schools and the professional development of other teachers and staff.

To ensure schools have access to training materials and expertise to develop their staff, we are funding NASEN to provide an SEN Gateway that provides access to a broad range of materials and support services across the range of SEN. To augment this we have worked with experts in the voluntary and community sector to ensure that specialist SEN teacher training materials developed in partnership with the Government in the past continue to be available and are updated by relevant experts as practice develops. Many aspects of the approach we are setting out in the new Code of Practice draw on learning from the piloting and subsequent work of *Achievement for All* (AfA). This demonstrates that when a whole school approach to supporting pupils with SEN is taken, along with effective engagement with parents there can be a clear impact on attainment. We have supported AfA during its set-up stage. It is now up to schools to decide whether they want to draw on its support. More than 2000 schools are already engaged with AfA.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): We have the national SENCO training and we work closely with Sheffield Hallam University on that. It is really important in making sure that SENCOs and newly appointed SENCOs have opportunities to undertake that training which is now a requirement. That has been well underway for the last few years. The other thing is NASEN put one some excellent Code of Practice and legislation training which has been open to schools. I have attended it and

some of Sheffield's schools have, but not all of them, and maybe we need to make sure that the information is distributed at an earlier time so that more can go, because it is really very good. But it is online, so schools can access it in that way. There is a whole host of additional training modules online for schools to be able to access. We need to make sure we get Code of Practice training before September for SENCOs. We have been at SENCO briefings this week talking about the Local Offer and the EHC Plans and they are very keen on training. As soon as the Code of Practice is out we will be out there with them going through that and making sure we have it in place for September. Yes, training is an important issue. But even with schools that don't necessarily have the training, because you have youngsters that you have never come across before. If you are a committed and inclusive school, you say to the parents, "I don't know what the answers are, but together we can work through this" and find a good way through. I don't think not knowing the particular needs of that particular child should stop us from trying to make sure it works. But clearly we need to make sure training is there collectively for schools, and we want parents to be involved in that; I am hoping that in the Code of Practice training we will have some representations from parents as part of that training, because I think if we model together how we can work together and how we can deliver the training together, it is a message for schools about how we work together.

Question 2: I have a son with autism and I also volunteer at the Parent Carer Forum; my question is can you confirm that it is business as normal for parents when applying for statements prior to the EHCP coming into force in September, so if parents were to make applications now, can you confirm that they are still being looked at and that there is not a higher proportion are being turned down?

Lesley Cheshire (Sheffield City Council): I can confirm that yes, we are of course still looking at any requests that are coming in right now, through all the normal processes that we have had in place for a number of years. So yes, we are absolutely looking at them in the way that we would have always have done and making the same types of decisions based on the same types of discussions. Nothing different happening at all. If we agree statutory assessment requests at the moment and the assessment goes through etc., we will actually produce statements, because it is only after the 1st September that we would produce an EHCP.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): Can I just add to that, in terms of the high needs banding which we haven't had an opportunity to talk about today. There is a way in which schools can more quickly access additional resources. So if the question is, we need additional help to meet this child's needs - if that is the function of the statutory request - the first thing to do is access that funding and see if that in itself will make the difference and then what we do beyond that. That system is now well embedded in Sheffield and we have lots of schools which come for additional funding. But we are still getting some that are coming through for requests for statutory assessment when really what they are asking is, "can we have some additional resources, to make the work that we want to do effective in schools now". That is part of the graduated response. We need to make sure we are accessing the funding that is available and use it effectively.

Alasdair Duerden (DfE): Again from a national perspective, it sort of sounded like your question was touching on something that we have heard from time to time: that everybody is worried that the EHC plans are more stringent than statements so you won't get them, whereas you might get a

statement now. From our perspective, that is not what we are trying to do, we have not changed or introduced any sort of criteria which says, this person will get an EHC plan and this person won't. It's pretty much the same in terms of that relative decision locally, what is the school already providing from the funding it's got, do you need something additional to that, which is all part of the decision-making process around the statement, and that's the same for the EHC plan. So if there are people that are worried that they are not going to get something in the new system that they would get in the current system, that is not necessarily the case. With the Local Offer added in, there shouldn't be anyone out there who is not able to access the support that they need. We are also thinking about putting some guidance out around getting into the system now. So people requesting statements now, if the system is ready and you've got the EHC plans out there, I think we are going to say actually by the time you have gone through the process we are pretty much in September anyway, so why not do the EHC plan? We are not going to require that but may make it a possibility for you to do that, if that's what you want to do. You would eventually have to convert to an EHC plan anyway, so it may be better to just do an EHC plan now.

Question 3: Hi, I am mum of a child that has recently been diagnosed with autism and I am also a trained teacher and I have worked with SEN students as a TA. I am really excited to hear that aspiration is what we are aiming for. My concern is, I have an 8-year-old who, when the school SENCO asked to access the Autism Team for support, has been told because my child is not at risk of permanent exclusion, they can't get to me because the demand in the city is so high and they are at full capacity and they don't have enough funding to support my child, so my child has to deteriorate to the point of not wanting to be in education to be internally excluded and permanently excluded before the school can access the support that they need.

The travesty of this is that I have a very bright little boy with complex needs who has the potential to contribute to society; his aspirations won't be met if you put him off learning now through lack of funding. I am concerned that, with the fact that the central government demand that Sheffield Council drop £50 million, there is a very real delivery issue, so whilst we are going to get some upstream money you have done a cruel cut, which means we don't have enough money to deliver the service adequately before children get to crisis point. I am really concerned and would like to hear your panel's views on why my child, who is disabled, is not going to get access to educational provision now that he needs before it deteriorates to a point of crisis? Thank you.

Alasdair Duerden (DfE): I completely understand the pressures around the funding. There is still a lot of money out there in the SEN system, and there will still be a lot of money out there in the SEN system, we just don't use it very well. This is about how we work better together to make sure that the money goes further. The core funding for local authorities is going down. SEN budgets are going up slightly, and we'll be putting in the additional money I talked about earlier [the SEN Reform Grant]. But like a lot of things these days, this funding isn't ring-fenced, so the local authority can decide what to spend it on – they could decide to spend it on the holes in the roads, which in Sheffield is a big issue... I understand all of that.

When we started working on this, a group of local authorities in the Southeast who are now the SE7 Pathfinder, said to us that they spent an awful lot of money to make an awful lot of people very unhappy, and it is that waste in the system and the inefficient way we approach all this that we have

got to turn around. I know that doesn't answer your immediate specific problem, my colleagues will be able to do that.

But in terms of where we are trying to get to as a government – it's about how we work better together as services, to avoid people falling through the gaps or having to wait until they get to a certain point before anyone will do anything about it. Again, the Local Offer should come in underneath that and be such a comprehensive offer of universal services that you can access, before your son or daughter gets to that point of needing that specialist service. We shouldn't be letting people get to a point where they need the complex needs services that cost an awful lot of money - we should be intervening much earlier, because it makes sense to do so, because then it doesn't cost as much money, and it is right for the child. That is where we are coming from, while recognising that, yes, the government has made these big cuts and we are in a very difficult financial situation. That is it from my perspective.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): I appreciate that the Autism Team is a very small team for Sheffield, but it is not the only team that has expertise in autism. One of the things that Stuart Williams, senior manager of the Autism Team, is trying to do is to bring together a network of people. So we have special schools who have expertise in autism, we have health people, speech therapists, who have expertise. We need to bring them together so we get the best out of them as a collective, along with the Autism Team. How we support schools should be through the collective wisdom of those services, rather than just one small team. On their own they cannot ever do that, even if their capacity was increased to double, we'd still have more demands than they could meet by themselves. So I appreciate your concerns, but we are trying to work on that to get better, and to prioritise it in ways which make sense for parents, but it is an issue in terms of being able to deliver enough capacity simply from the Autism Team. If you want to come and talk to me later, I'll try and pick that up and see what's happening for your particular youngster.

Question 4: I am a parent of a child with ADHD and there seems to be a gap in the provision. Because it is a milder form of behavioural difficulty, even though it is qualified as a disability, we don't get a statement. We have applied twice, he is a full year behind the other children in his school, and although the school are trying their best with the banding provision to give him a bit of extra support, I feel that he is not going to be able to catch up now. He is 7 years old, coming up to his initial SATS, and there is nothing out there for me to access for support, and I don't know who to talk to. We struggle with him at home, we have had play therapy sessions which have been unsuccessful, but we are kind of left now with a gap – we have done everything and there is nothing to follow on.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): Can I say that is the sort of thing that we need to know about, because in the Local Offer we need to address that. If it's a gap in provision - which it clearly is - then we need to be able to do something about that. I would suggest that you contact me and see what we can do in terms of a contribution to the Local Offer, to make sure it is in there. You won't be the only parent for whom that will be helpful.

Question 5: I have got a child with Asperger's and mental health and other complex issues, and he has been out of school now for six months. We have had some excellent service from the Home and Hospital Service. From what I can gather, this service is chronically underfunded and you can get three hours a week while your child is off school. Also the system, in terms of looking for alternative provision for a child that is off school, doesn't seem to work too well or fast. I just wondered if the new system will resolve some of those issues?

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): I think the Local Offer will make it more transparent where the gaps are, because although we individually know about that, this will make it public and enable us to then say, what are we going to do about it strategically? So, if we can make sure it gets into the Local Offer along with any other gaps, we then have a plan to work towards in terms of improving it. We need to establish a benchmark for this year by getting feedback from service users about what is effective and what isn't working or what's missing, and then plan what we need to do to improve on that year by year. So I think that the Local Offer is going to be key to getting it right. We won't get it right from September 2014 in terms of it being perfect, but we will have a benchmark and then we can improve on that. So having that information about what is missing at the moment will help us to make sure we get it right or as right as we can for September, and then at subsequent reviews of the Local Offer we can improve on that. I hope you will be part of the Local Offer, because I will be very happy to involve both of you, both parents that have raised this, in terms of parental representation in the Local Offer and anyone else that wants to come (but there will be a limit to how many I can get in the room).

Alasdair Duerden (DfE): I have worked with Sheffield Local Authority on number of different government initiatives over the years and they are very good at working together and trying to get that sort of stuff right. The fact that you just had that answer from Sheffield authority really encourages me, because it shows that they have really understood the strategic aims we are trying to get to with the Local Offer. It is about being part of that process - saying, this is the problem we are facing and these are the gaps in service. The Local Offer then comes in, and commissioners are able to say right across education, health and care, we can now commission this local offer that deals with the sort of circumstances you both just described, so I am really encouraged to hear Mary say that, because you have really understood what we are trying to do - it is about you, the parents, being really involved in that, through the opportunities that Sheffield gives you to feed this information in, because if they don't know about it, they can't address the issues. The answer is that, at the end of it all, you will have a Local Offer that is really transparent, and you won't be in the position you are in now, that you don't know who to call or where to go, because it should all be in that Local Offer. It will take time, this is difficult stuff - it will take 2/3/4 years before it really starts to bed in and begins to pick up. This is a journey that we are on, and from 1st September, the world is not going to suddenly be a better place when the new legislation gets turned on. We have a lot of work to do to build a new system together that works for our children and young people.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): Can I just mention the young people as well, because we have talked about what parents feel is missing, but we have also been doing some work with young people to find out what they think are the gaps in provision, and they are not necessarily the same, although some of them are. So I did a presentation on the Local Offer in the Town Hall for service users, parents and professionals, and one of the questions raised by a young person in the 16-25 age group was, "how are you going to consult with young people to find out their views?" And I said,

“well, what would you suggest?” He said, “come and talk to us.” So I did, I went down to Newfield learning and resource centre and spent an hour and a half with young people asking them what they thought the Local Offer should look like and what their issues were. They were very realistic in giving information about the gaps as they saw it. For instance, they talked about “how do I find out about courses that will enable me to become semi or fully independent?” “Who will teach me how to budget my money so that I can manage the weekly income that I get?” “Who is going to teach me about travelling independently?” We had an excellent session and they gave me some really good feedback. At the end they started talking about their gardening activities and I am interested in gardening, so we had a bit of a chat about that and before I knew it, they signed me up for the 11th April for them to come and do some work in the garden - provided I provided lunch for them and the equipment and the tools and the plants to plant, so I have booked a day off to do that and I am looking forward to it.

Question 6: I am a parent of a child with complex needs, the complexity of which means he has to learn in very small steps and a lot of repetition. I am also a teacher, so I have one foot in both camps. At the moment we are just going through an appeal process, with regards to trying to get a statement for my son. I wanted to know, when the new legislation kicks in September, will the role of Parent Partnership still be statutory? They have been a fantastic support, and I'd just like to know what is going to happen?

Alasdair Duerden (DfE): [edited] Section 32 of the Children and Families Act makes it clear that local authorities must provide all parents, children and young people with information, advice and support that covers SEND, disability and related health and social care and is impartial, confidential and free. This is an expanded requirement, and the new SEN Code of Practice will make it clear that local authorities:

- should develop a dedicated and easily identifiable service, building on existing services such as Parent Partnership Services;
- must ensure that young people can access the service independently of their parents if they wish; and
- should involve children, parents and young people in the design or commissioning of the service.

Local authorities can either offer this service themselves or commission the service from an external organisation.

We also see Parent Carer Forums as having an on-going and important role – not least in helping parents and young people get involved in helping shape and implement the reforms in their local authority. In recognition of this, we have increased the funding for each Parent Carer Forum in 2014-15 from £10,000 to £15,000.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): Our expectation is that it will be strengthened, because of the parent supporter investment [Independent Supporters] that will be alongside Parent Partnership rather than a step up. That is my understanding.

Question 7: I just wanted to know what is being done about ethnic minorities and those hard to reach parents - are they being consulted with as well, if they are not as assertive or articulate as some other parents?

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): You are absolutely right, it is difficult get to all parents, but we want to make sure that it is representative. I will ask Lesley to answer about what is happening on the EHC plan.

Lesley Cheshire (Sheffield City Council): I suppose the approach that we took in determining where we were going to focus the EHCP pilots, was very much in some areas of the city where there are parents who are harder to reach and where there is a greater range of ethnic minority populations. We have got parents from ethnic minority populations signed up to the pilot, so I think we went out of our way to source that, and that shows our commitment to making sure that the widest range of parents possible are involved. I know that Mary has tried, through the consultation events that she has carried out on the Local offer, to reach the harder to reach elements of the population. We can't get it 100% right, we can only try our best. I know for a fact that on the Local Offer project board we have a representative from a BME group as well, so we are making every effort we possibly can, and are appreciating the diverse nature of Sheffield.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): Again I would urge people if you are interested and able, to come and join us at the Local Offer, you'd be more than welcome.

Question 8: Hi I am the regional family support co-ordinator for Caudwell Children, which is a voluntary sector organisation, recently come into Sheffield. I have worked with the Calderdale pathfinder project from the beginning and I did some resilience training for parents as part of the pathfinder project in Calderdale. Since coming into Sheffield, I have been picking up a lot of families that have fallen through the gaps, they are confused about what the changes are going to be, some of them don't qualify for assessment and have been refused for assessment before, so I am really excited about what you are saying about the Local Offer and about people like myself being involved to be able to bridge that gap in service.

Mary Collins (Sheffield City Council): Please do, don't let me leave the room without having given me some contact details.

Question 9: You are expecting the Code of Practice and Regulations to go before Parliament in the next few weeks, can you say a little bit more about that please?

Alasdair Duerden (DfE): I can't be any more specific I am afraid. We have been re-writing the Code of Practice – we keep doing versions, we consulted on a big version just before Christmas, which many of you may have seen and commented on. We've taken on board those comments, we're restructuring and re-writing it, and have put it out for a few trusted stakeholders to look at again, with organisations like IPSEA, SEC and CDC, who are helping us with that. There is another version being prepared at the moment. There isn't an actual date by which we will put it before Parliament, we will do it as soon as possible, as otherwise nobody will know what they're doing from September.

