

# Focus Group on Statements and Transitions

16<sup>th</sup> September 2011, 10am-12pm, Quaker Meeting House

**Attendees:** Christine Parks (Head of SEN), Mary Collins (Principal Educational Psychologist), Yolande Tose (Parent Partnership), Sally Gregory, Julie Hardcastle, Rachel Crowther, Amanda Wilcox, Laura Gillespie, Maria Fernandes, Clare Peck, Geraldine Whittle, Anne Snowdon (SPCF Development Support Worker), Eva Juusola (SPCF Development Worker, notes)

## 1. Restructuring of SEN Team

ChP reported that the SEN team is undergoing an “Achieving Change” programme. The number of full-time case workers has now dropped to five (this number may fluctuate), mainly because people who were on secondment have returned to their original posts. Karen Chester has left the service and has not yet been replaced. ChP is on a one-year secondment to the service and is currently picking up some of Karen’s work, including chairing panel meetings. The team is meeting performance indicators for statutory assessments. A proposal has been made to restructure the team so that there would be three principal officers specialising in early years, school age children, and the 14-25 age group, respectively.

## 2. Panel meetings

Parents enquired whether parents were now routinely being phoned by caseworkers after panel meetings, as agreed at the previous meeting. ChP said that this was the intention, but conceded that it wasn’t happening in every case.

**JF requested that panels should supply case workers with written notes about decisions taken and the reasons for them, to enable them to relate definite outcomes to parents and schools.** JF reported that in her daughter’s case, a senior officer had attended a meeting without knowing what the Resources panel had decided. MC explained that panel notes are taken to record key decisions and action points. There are two panels: a social care panel, and a panel to discuss multi-professional assessments. Cases must be heard within six weeks after a request is made. Parents get a letter relating the decision, but not the reasons for it.

**CP observed that parents should be told when a panel will be hearing their child’s case so that they can engage with the process, e.g. by submitting additional evidence.** Most parents are not aware of the six-week rule, and they are not usually told when a school has sent off a request.

MF pointed out that in adult social care, case workers get back piece of paper stating outcomes and areas of disagreement. Case workers can then relate the decision to clients by phone. Officers expressed concerns about the capacity of SEN case workers to ring parents before and after meetings (it is

not possible to use email as Council rules state that emails must not contain information about named youngsters).

SG said that parents don't get to see the case worker report before it is submitted to panel, and so cannot be sure that the case worker hasn't misinterpreted something or missed out relevant bits. MC explained that case workers should only collate information, not summarise it. She reassured SG that panel members always read **all** the documents before the meeting.

**Parents suggested that parents should be given a check list of relevant documents, and that parental input should be sought via a more structured form, to ensure parents submit all relevant information.** YT advised that Parent Partnership has leaflets to help with this.

### **3. Statutory assessments**

Parents enquired what happens before and after a request for a statutory assessment is made. ChP explained that in Sheffield, reports are requested *before* a request to assess goes to panel. Schools must demonstrate in their submission how they have attempted to meet the child's needs from their delegated budget. Once a multi-professional assessment has been agreed, all professionals are asked to provide up-to-date information. This process is handled differently in other authorities.

SG observed that schools often refuse to put in requests for statutory assessments, telling parents that their child does not meet the criteria, or that they can't afford the staff time to complete all the paperwork, since statements do not come with extra money attached. Without the support of the school, parental requests for multi-professional assessments usually fail. MC felt that the SEN green paper will lead to a tightening of the statutory assessment process, with only a very small group of children being eligible for single plans.

### **4. Mainstream inclusion**

MF observed that inclusive mainstream schools often become "magnets" for children with SEN and can become victims of their own success. Head teachers at some mainstream schools in Sheffield unofficially discourage parents of children with SEN from applying for a place at their school. ChP said that she was aware of these issues, and that the local authority must support and challenge schools. Parents expressed frustration that discussions about inclusion always seem to attract the same interested head teachers, with a notable absence of secondary head teachers. They questioned how the local authority can change such entrenched attitudes. MC noted that head teachers are sensitive to comparisons with other head teachers, and respond well to peer pressure.

**Parents requested that there should be a central point where parents can go to flag up schools that are not welcoming.** School governors are not always the best people to complain to as some tend to close ranks. Also parents often don't want to be identified for fear of antagonising the people their child depends upon. YT said that she was happy to be a conduit.

**ACTION:** SPCF to propose to the ILS Steering Group to collect feedback from the wider public about what is working well and what isn't, including comments about individual schools, and to discuss responses in a officer/parent group.

MC reported that a kitemark for inclusion is currently being discussed. Parental complaints as well as positive feedback could affect a school's kitemark status. ChP commented that there is research evidence which indicates that often 'high achieving schools' are inclusive, as inclusive teaching benefits all pupils. Parents reported that some schools discourage children with SEN from sitting exams to protect their position in the league tables.

## 5. SENCOs

MC invited the Forum to provide an input on the parental perspective in the LA training for 19 newly appointed SENCOs on the National SENCO training on 24 November. There may also be an opportunity to attend a SENCO cluster meeting during the w/c 7<sup>th</sup> November.

**ACTION:** MC to send information about dates/venues to EJ.

Parents criticised that many SENCOs are also class teachers and assistant head teachers, which skews the system of checks and balances. **Being a SENCO should be a job in itself.**

MC observed that the knowledge/experience of SEN governors is variable, e.g. many do not know in detail how much money is in their school's individual needs budget this year. Forum representatives could perhaps talk about the role of parents at a meeting of SEN governors.

**ACTION:** MC to liaise with EJ re. meeting dates.

## 6. Annual reviews

An annual review meeting should include looking at parts 2 and 3 of a child's statement to see what needs to be amended. If it is felt that a statement no longer describes the child at all, the school can request a reassessment. Parents commented that there often isn't enough time in annual review meetings to look at the statement. ChP commented that this was the purpose of the Annual review.

Following the annual review meeting, parents usually receive the head teacher's report, but they don't normally hear back from the LA or receive an amended statement. ChP acknowledged that there has been a large backlog with annual reviews which has now been addressed. This is partly due to the cumbersome IT system, which is currently under review.

The responsibility to make amendments to the statement lies with LA, but schools, parents and professionals can make suggestions. It is important to note that the LA can't make changes to the statement if there is no evidence base. For example, a new diagnosis must be submitted in writing before it can be included in the statement.

JF observed that statements should be considered when deciding on school admissions, yet children don't normally get a full amended statement until the placement has almost been determined. **Parents felt that a full amended statement should be in place before the Y5 transition review. EJ suggested that the parental feedback form for annual reviews should be amended to include a question asking parents whether they felt that parts 2 and 3 of the statement were still correct.**

ChP stated that at the transition review in Y5 parents are asked about their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences for their child's secondary school. This data helps with place planning. The SEN team also asks schools at the beginning of the year to indicate where LA support might be required. If there is an issue or likely challenges, case workers will try to attend annual review meetings.

**LG felt that there needed to be a better dialogue with parents. Parents should be shown other options.** ChP agreed, but cautioned that there simply aren't enough special school places to satisfy parental demand in Sheffield.

## **7. Primary-to-secondary transitions**

CP reported that her daughter could only move to mainstream secondary school with full-time support. At the transition meeting, everyone was in agreement that this was the best option, but CP felt that the onus was on her as the parent to be proactive and request the extra support needed. This required a lot of energy; **CP felt that the process must be made to work for the child, regardless of how "pushy" the parent is.** GW reported that her son's placement in a mainstream secondary school failed because he was given a different LSA for every lesson. All agreed that it is very easy for mainstream placements to fail, and that a concerted effort is needed to make them work.

EJ enquired how full-time support in mainstream (i.e. 32.5 hours per week) compared to a special school placement. MC responded that a full-time TA costs around £14K (to which you would have to add the cost of the school place), compared to £18K for a place at Bents Green plus transport.

GW stated that transport is an important consideration when deciding on a school placement. She did not want her son to attend the local mainstream school as he was unable to travel to school safely. Sending him to this school meant having to escort him there and back, whereas he would be entitled to travel assistance if attending a special school.

MC responded that Sarah Draper has acknowledged the need for a more flexible transport policy.

AS queried why parents are not told until the very last moment (July) which school their child will attend (primary admissions). ChP responded that the team had decided that out of fairness, parents should not be told until every child had been placed. The process of consultation with schools can take a long time. Parents are not always involved in the debate when child does not meet the criteria for their 1<sup>st</sup> choice of school, so may not have a clue what is happening until the decision has been made. RC reported that she was still

waiting to hear about her son's school placement in March. When the letter eventually came, the named school was one she not requested, had never even looked at, and which nobody had ever suggested to her.

**Parents felt that the onus should not be on the parent to be proactive and keep ringing up the SEN team. They should be informed about the process, and kept in the loop.**

## **8. Review of support services**

MC reported that a number of support services are currently being review. This review is intended to enable services to respond in more effective ways to schools, parents and other users. Managers of each service had to prepare a series of workshop papers, which formed part of discussions with head teachers and officers regarding potential service models. For example, schools frequently say they like what they get from the Educational Psychology Service, but they don't get enough of it. When looking at a potential service model, the service had to consider how it could increase capacity – which in the absence of additional funding can only be done by making schools pay for non-statutory services, such as training, social skills groups, circle of friends etc. (these are statutory only if specified in statements). The proposals will go to the Head Teacher reference group, then the City-Wide Learning Body to be signed off. Parents' views will also be collected - Andrew Jones is leading on this.

Mary Collins presented the issues/models for the review of the Autism service. She identified how expertise is held in a number of services/settings, e.g. special schools, IRs, Autism Team, Parents' groups, charities. The aspiration is to bring all of these together. Phase 1 will consist of identifying what's working well in those services, gaps and issues, including what parents think. Sarah Draper is leading the work of the Officers – the role of parents will undoubtedly be a point for Phase 2 – what we can do to deliver a better service. The timescale is tight, as the proposals are to be signed off by the City-Wide Learning Body in November.

As more and more funding is given directly to schools, services are likely to be moving from a commissioned to a traded service model. For example, the Learning Support service is 60% traded already. The Autism Team has a statutory duty around assessment and meeting needs. The LA must ensure this is provided, but it could be outsourced (there are no plans to do that at present).

Parents enquired what happens if a school doesn't want to buy in the traded bit. MC explained that there is only a duty to deliver a service if it is specified in the SEN legislation or is identified in the child's statement. The LA wants schools to be able to buy in what their pupils need. There is a new role for LAs to ensure that services are being delivered. LAs must meet statutory duties through commissioning and quality monitoring. Nationally SEN funding won't be devolved to academies. There are still a number of uncertainties about admissions to academies and their roles and responsibilities regarding pupils with SEN.

When a school converts to academy status, it has the opportunity to take a lead role in relation to other schools in the area. Some Head teachers may worry about their schools being taken over by an academy which gets better results simply because its pupils start from different position. This could have the impact of penalising inclusive schools and schools in deprived areas.

### **9. Criteria for carrying out a statutory assessment**

ChP advised that these are under review and will probably remain so until a white paper is published. EJ explained that the SPCF would like to write a summary of criteria and publish them on their website.

**ACTION:** EJ to email summary document to ChP to ensure accuracy.